WORKS LIKE A CHARM:
THE OCCULT RESISTANCE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

by
Noelle Victoria Dubay

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Abstract

Works like a Charm: The Occult Resistance of Nineteenth-Century American Literature finds that the question of whether power could work by occult means—whether magic was real, in other words—was intimately tied, in post-Revolutionary America, to the looming specter of slave revolt. Through an examination of a variety of materials—trial narratives, slave codes, novels and short stories, pamphlets, popular occult ephemera—I argue that U.S. planters and abolitionists alike were animated by reports that spiritual leaders boasting supernatural power headed major rebellions across the Caribbean, most notably in British-ruled Jamaica and French-ruled Saint-Domingue. If, in William Wells Brown's words, the conjurer or root-doctor of the southern plantation had the power to live as though he was "his own master," might the same power be capable of toppling slavery's regimes altogether? This question crossed political lines, as proslavery lawmakers and magistrates as well as antislavery activists sought to describe, manage, and appropriate the threat posed by black conjuration without affirming its claims to supernatural power. *Works like a Charm* thus situates the U.S. alongside other Atlantic sites of what I call "occult resistance"—a deliberately ambivalent phrase meant to register both the documented use of occult practices to resist slavery and the plantocracy's resistance to the viability of countervailing powers occulted (i.e., hidden) from their regimes of knowledge—at the same time as it argues that anxiety over African-derived insurrectionary practices was a key factor in the supposed secularization of the West.

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Introduction:
The Literature of Occult Resistance

It took only a few months after the first vampire appeared in London—in prose, in the form of John Polidori's 1819 novella, *The Vampyre*[1]— for an American writer to determine Polidori's creature was "White,"[2] and to put forward a tale suited for the other side of the Atlantic: *The Black Vampyre: A Legend of St. Domingo.* The pseudonymous "Uriah Derick D'Arcy" campily rewrites Polidori's original "Byronic" vampire—a suave, lascivious, and overpowering villain—as an immortal African (of the "Eboe" tribe) and a Haitian revolutionary.[3] While Polidori's "White" English vampire roams London and the continent, D'Arcy's "Black" vampire arrives twice on St. Domingo's shores, where the majority of the story takes place—first as a young, emaciated boy just off a French slave ship, and then sixteen years later transformed into a "Moorish Prince," returned to the island to right the wrongs of slavery (20). Thus, the first vampire to appear in American literature is an African prince whose last words, shouted to a gathered group of Haitian rebels, are "UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION!!!" (36).

[1] The novella was initially attributed to Lord Byron, who immediately denied authorship. The story's commercial success was in part due to this authorial controversy, which may also have inspired *The Black Vampyre*'s author to employ an obvious pseudonym.

[2] According to D'Arcy's introduction (14).

[3] *The Black Vampyre*, p. 34. Uriah Derick D'Arcy is likely either Robert C. Sands, an author in the Knickerbocker group to whom the story is attributed in an 1845 reprinting in *The Knickerbocker*, or the anagrammatic Richard Varick Dey. Andrew Barger made the initial case for Sands' authorship, his primary evidence being the 1845 reprinting (*The Best Vampire Stories,* pp. 134-7). Katie Bray has more recently argued that the original text contains too harsh a criticism of the Knickerbockers to have been authored by a member, even satirically ("'A Climate . . . More Prolific . . . in Sorcery': *The Black Vampyre* and the Hemispheric Gothic," pp. 19-20, n4). The question of authorship matters to this argument only insofar as the author appears to be a white northern writer.

This is not to say, however, that *The Black Vampyre* stands as the first piece of antislavery short fiction in U.S. literature, as Andrew Barger has claimed.[4] For while the story makes a mockery of its slaveholding planter Mr. Personne, who accidentally burns himself alive on a pyre he erects for the murder of his vampiric slave, no character escapes unscathed—and indeed, the rebellion is quashed before it begins and Mr. Personne happily resurrected by the story's end. Though D'Arcy does allow a descendent of the black vampire to escape to North American shores, he has no problem staking and "securely dispos[ing] of" his charismatic lead (38). D'Arcy's resituated gothic takes the revolutionary figures of recent Atlantic history and renders them elements of fantasy—even while the story's final gesture finds them lurking in nearer shadows.

The association of incipient black rebellion with supernatural activity was not an invention of D'Arcy's. Commentators across the Americas had frequently connected the resistance of enslaved people of African descent to beliefs and practices presumed to issue from Africa, variously referred to as "obeah," "vodou," or "conjure." Though they refused to understand such power on its own terms, colonial authorities across the British Caribbean, in particular, were aware of and concerned over accounts of spiritual leaders who held, to their view, unaccountable influence over their followers. British colonial writing documents cases of obeah-men and women performing miraculous cures for patients suffering under mysterious illnesses, administering curses, and providing charms of invulnerability to enslaved rebels. Historians of the Caribbean have noted that obeah became a particular object of "colonial counterinsurgency"—from the passage of anti-obeah legislation to the public torturing and

[4] *The Best Vampire Stories 1800-1849: A Classic Vampire Anthology*, p. 134.

execution of captured occult practitioners in acts meant to inspire what Vincent Brown has described as "spiritual terror"—after it was discovered that obeah-men played a major role in Tacky's Revolt in 1760 Jamaica.[5] D'Arcy's appropriation of obeah—a term from British Jamaica he air-lifts into his French Saint Domingue setting—as material for his comedy reflects the practices of British writers who wrote disparagingly about a topic that nonetheless enraptured them at the same time as it reveals that the threat posed by black supernatural claims to power was beginning to be felt beyond the locales that furnished these source texts. It is, I believe, no coincidence that *The Black Vampyre* precedes the U.S.'s most publicized trial of an alleged black conspiratorial sorcerer, the subject of my first chapter, by only a few years.

I begin with this story not because it represents an influential moment in U.S. literature—to the contrary, no evidence suggests *The Black Vampyre* was widely read, though in their introduction to the most recent edition Duncan Faherty and Ed White note it was advertised broadly—at least as far as South Carolina. Rather, I see in *The Black Vampyre* an early instance of a particular method of addressing the potentiality of occult resistance to slavery in the United States—a method that proslavery and abolitionist writers alike would go on to perfect. The term "occult resistance" from my subtitle refers both to insurrectionary occult practices and the way they appear in nineteenth-century U.S. writing, oftentimes mediated through the language of "superstition" or "primitivity" required by the rise of Enlightenment rationality. Keeping a larger Atlantic context in view, I observe that, as US. slaveholders faced

[5] See Andrew McCann, "Conjugal Love & the Enlightenment subject: The Colonial Context of Non-Identity in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*," pp. 65-6); Alan Richardson, "Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797-1807," pp. 7-8; and Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* and "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society."

the threat of enslaved conjurers on their own turf, they positioned themselves as incredulous subjects with defenses nevertheless suspiciously raised. Thus the phrase "occult resistance" also describes the measures taken to inoculate against such challenges—criminalizing conjuration, for example—while at the same time accounting for its efficacy in "secularizing" or Christianizing terms: resisting "occulted" or hidden practices of enslaved rebels by bringing them into the "light"—or, in the case of *The Black Vampyre,* "making light" of them. While much recent work on the pertinence of secularization narratives to the history of the nineteenth-century United States has focused on debates around popular science and religious movements in the North, as my second chapter outlines, I focus on the ambivalent handling of occult resistance to slavery to argue, alongside Emily Ogden, that the proper "management" of such destabilizing figures was of prime importance: recasting the threat posed by the non-Christian occult practitioner in terms more amenable to what might be called the "powers of whiteness."

While *The Black Vampyre* may represent the first sustained literary treatment of black occult revolt published in the U.S., literary depictions of rebellious slaves engaging in occult activity had begun to appear in British Romantic literature as early as 1797. William Shepherd's "The Negro's Incantation," for example, ventriloquizes Jamaican rebels on the eve of Tacky's Revolt, recounting a "solemn hour / When we with magic rites the white man's doom prepare."[6] The poem's publication inaugurates what Alan Richardson calls a "decade of troubled fascination with obeah in England," beginning in the late eighteenth century and ending with the 1807

[6] *Monthly Register* [London], Vol. 4, Issue 20, Jul 1797, p. 51.

staging of the comic pantomime *Furibond, or Harlequin Negro*—the same year Britain abolished the slave trade.[7]

Like *The Black Vampyre*, the majority of the works associated with this period—most prominently William Earle's 1800 novella *Obi, or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack*; Jack Fawcett's 1800 melodrama *Obi; or, Three Finger'd Jack*; and Maria Edgeworth's 1804 story "The Grateful Negro"—cite and quote extensively from popular colonial ethnographic sources, particularly Bryan Edwards' 1793 *History, civil and commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* and Benjamin Moseley's 1799 *A Treatise on Sugar*. Shepherd credits the *History* for "[giving] birth to [his] Ode," the same source from which Edgeworth admits her story's "ideas are adopted—not stolen."[8] That British readers and theatergoers approach the works they took in as "founded on … Matter[s] of Fact," however "blended" for dramatic effect with "fictitious circumstances," as the songbook for Fawcett's *Obi* explains, is a chief concern for writers looking both to tap into the commercial success of natural and political history writing coming out of the British West Indies and to engage in fraught debates about British participation in plantation slavery and the slave trade.[9] Refracting past conflicts—namely Tacky's Revolt and the capture of Jack Mansong—through a moral or political lens was the chief form these literary engagements took.

[7] "Romantic Voodoo," pp. 9, 22. Richardson's periodization begins during a moment of increased unrest for British troops in the colonial Atlantic: Jamaica's Second Maroon War, and the forced withdrawal of British troops from revolutionary Saint Domingue.
[8] "The Grateful Negro," in *Popular Tales*, p. 195.
[9] *Songs, duets, & choruses, in the pantomimical drama of Obi* (London, T. Woodfall, n.d. [1800?]), p. 2. See especially George E. Boulukos, "Maria Edgeworth's 'Grateful Negro' and the Sentimental Argument for Slavery."

On its surface, *The Black Vampyre* may read as a late U.S. iteration of this sub-genre of Anglophone literature; indeed, Fawcett's *Obi* was revived in New York after a ten-year absence in the summer of 1816, just a few years before D'Arcy wrote his story, and in conjunction with the publication of a new edition of Edwards' *History* in 1819 may have provoked D'Arcy's turn to obeah to furnish his "Legend."[10] The shape his story of occult resistance takes, however, is no mere repetition of the British form. For while British writers tended to fictionalize particular events and figures from British colonial history, *The Black Vampyre* accumulates and combines details from disparate locales and instances of resistance to create a speculative, open-ended narrative with no singular historical tether (though located, tellingly, in prerevolutionary Haiti): D'Arcy's black vampyre, styled loosely after Toussaint L'Ouverture, recites an emancipation speech cribbed from John Philpot Curran, an Irish lawyer who spoke on behalf of James Somerset in his 1772 British freedom suit.[11] The speech's cavern setting borrows from Edwards' account of a 1790 rebellion led by Vincent Ogé in Saint Domingue, as a footnote by D'Arcy's indicates, but the cavern's walls are decorated with items straight from Edwards' (citing Edward Long's) description of a Jamaican "Obi's" materials: "the beaks of parrots;—the teeth of dogs, and alligators;—bones of cats;—broken glass and eggshells; plastered with a composition of rum and grave-dirt" (32).[12] Rather than attempt to make sense of a

[10] See *The Colombian* [New York], 8 June 1816, pg. 3. See also the *Commercial Advertiser,* 2 July 1816, pg. 3, for an advertisement for a special 4th of July performance.

[11] Compare the Vampyre's speech: "Our fetters discandied, and our chains dissolved, we shall stand liberated,—redeemed,—emancipated,—and disenthralled by the irresistible genius of UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION!!!" (36) to Curran's: "his body swells beyond the measure of his chains that burst from around him; and he stands redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled, by the irresistible Genius of UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION" (Qtd., among many other places, in *The Independent Democrat* [New Hampshire], 4 February 1858, p. 1).

[12] Compare with Edwards: "The *Obi* is usually composed of a farrago of materials. ... Blood, feathers, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, alligators' teeth, broken bottles, grave-dirt, rum, and egg-shells" (vol. II, pp. 111-12).

historical instance of resistance, *The Black Vampyre* consolidates and elides materials to register occult black resistance as a generalized Atlantic threat—crucially, a threat to which the United States is susceptible. Though the events of the story take place in San Domingo between mainly French and African characters, the manuscript documenting these events is held by one "Anthony Gibbons," a resident of New Jersey who is revealed in the penultimate sentence to be a "lineal descendent" of the child produced through a short-lived union between the titular vampire and Mr. Personne's wife during the planter's temporary interment. Without confirming Gibbons' status, the story's final words put us in fear that, at some future moment, a (covert, African-descended) vampire may find need to "glut his thirst" upon an unfortunate victim (40).

It's worth mentioning that D'Arcy's story was published before any association, however contentious, of Haitian Vodun with the commencement of the Revolution had been broadly established. That is, he appears not to pass on an already-established rumor, but to freely associate between occult practices and slave revolt. While it is now generally accepted that some sort of unifying, sacrificial ceremony at a place called Bois Caïman did take place in the days before the struggle began, the first of the few textual sources we have to confirm the ceremony's existence did not appear in print until 1814, and then in French.[13] D'Arcy's thoroughly footnoted story makes no mention of the French sources that existed in 1819 and borrows no setting details from them. Though it's possible he had encountered these texts, *The*

[13] See David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, p. 82. The first account to appear was Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la revolution de Saint-Domingue* (1814), pp. 116-27. The other two accounts are Antoine Metral, *Histoire de l'insurrection des esclaves dans le Nord de Saint-Domingue* (1818), pp. 15-20, and Civique de Gastine, *Histoire de la Republique d'Haiti ou Saint-Domingue, l'esclavage et les colons* (1819), pp. 104-6.

Black Vampyre would represent an astonishingly early fictionalization of a ceremony that was not widely known. More likely, D'Arcy seized upon a growing sense that the long-lingering institution of U.S. slavery could be generating occult forms of rebellion.

According to historian Edward B. Rugemer, "there were more slave rebellions in the first three decades of the nineteenth century than during any like period in Atlantic history."[14] Yet even as freedom struggles erupted in Barbados, Cuba, Guyana, and the United States, and despite the success of the gradual abolition movement in the Northern states—all of which had passed abolitionist legislation by 1804—massive growth in the production of coffee, sugar, and cotton led to a "renewed expansion" of slavery in the Americas, now commonly called the "second slavery."[15] Manisha Sinha describes the first decades of the nineteenth century as a period of "explosive expansion of slavery into the trans-Mississippi West" with "an interstate slave trade whose dimensions … far exceeded the African slave trade to mainland North America."[16] For many U.S. planters, the possibility of economic dominance reliant upon enslaved labor and the slave trade competed with ever-present concerns over black insurrection. When Congress rescinded a short-lived 1804 prohibition of the international and domestic slave trades in newly acquired Louisiana, Southern slaveholders took advantage of the ability to expand into arable territory and to diffuse "fearfully large slave populations" on plantations in the Upper

[14] *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance*, p. 248.
[15] Ibid., p. 9. Dale W. Tomich originates the term in "The 'Second Slavery:' Bonded Labor and the Transformation of the Nineteenth Century World Economy."
[16] *The Slave's Cause*, p. 160.

South.[17] In response to a concern that the persistence of U.S. slavery was "laying the foundation for another St. Domingo," Kentucky Senator John Breckinridge argued that permitting Southern slaveholding men to settle further west "will disperse and weaken that race—and free the southern states from a part of its black population, and of its danger."[18]

Westward expansion, however, did little to reduce free and enslaved black populations in the southeast. Charleston, for example, remained over seventy percent black through the 1840 census, a percentage that resembled certain areas of the Caribbean.[19] Even early sectionalist proslavery proponents, otherwise disdainful of the increasingly antislavery North, found themselves relying upon the overwhelming whiteness of the North to allay concerns over rebellions in black-majority regions. In the wake of the 1822 Charleston conspiracy trials, Baptist minister Richard Furman falteringly insisted that "the Negroes should know, that however numerous they are in some parts of these Southern States, they, yet, are not, even including all descriptions, bond and free, in the United States, but little more than one sixth part of the whole number…"[20] As Southern planters strove to replicate the economic success of a place like late eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, planters in the South and abolitionists in the North appeared well aware that the necessary demographic shifts increased the odds that insurrectionary activity could find success.

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[17] John Craig Hammond, "'They Are Very Much Interested in Obtaining an Unlimited Slavery': Rethinking the Expansion of Slavery in the Louisiana Purchase Territories, 1803-1805," p. 354, 360. See also George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, p. 107.

[18] Everett S. Brown, "The Senate Debate on the Breckinridge Bill for the Government of Louisiana, 1804," p. 354.

[19] Lincoln Mullen, "The Spread of U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860."; Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, p. 6.

[20] *Rev. Dr. Richard Furman's Exposition…*, p. 229.

Tensions over the continuation and expansion of U.S. slavery came to a head in 1819—the same year *The Black Vampyre* appeared—during the debate over granting Missouri statehood. Many within a "reenergized" abolitionist movement began to adopt a more immediatist agenda, while proslavery planters developed paternalist arguments for the necessity of continuous, expanded enslavement.[21] On both sides, many were energized by the specter of large-scale black revolt, either as a warning encouraging immediate abolition or an argument for harsher forms of domination. In the midst of these debates, free and enslaved black people were, of course, resisting enslavement by manifold means. Particularly after the trial of Gabriel Prosser, an enslaved man who, along with a group of co-conspirators, intended to capture Richmond in 1800, reports of conspiracies of various sizes set states like Virginia on edge. On a more local scale, slaveholders reacted with trepidation, ridicule, and violence to the occult practice of conjure, an esoteric system of healing, harming, protection, and divination that Jason R. Young argues constituted "an independent realm of criminality, justice, and authority outside the immediate authority of whites."[22] In the words of William Wells Brown, the plantation conjurer often lived as though they were their "own master."[23] It was in this climate of increased tensions over slavery, increasing enslaved populations, and heightened attention to the potentially insurrectionary practices of enslaved peoples that D'Arcy's *The Black Vampyre* appeared.

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[21] *The Slave's Cause*, p. 160. Colonization arguments also developed during this time: the newly formed (1816) American Colonization Society, mainly composed of slaveholders and white abolitionists, argued for the migration of free blacks outside of the U.S.

[22] *Rituals of Resistance*, p. 139.

[23] *My Southern Home: or, The South and its People*, p. 71.

If it is the case that D'Arcy's story reflected anxieties particular to the U.S., why do the story's events take place in St. Domingo? According to Gretchen J. Woertendyke, the Haitian Revolution "became a flexible and versatile short hand for impending violence in the developing U.S. romance."[24] D'Arcy's decision to place his vampire in Haiti displaces fears of revolt to the Caribbean even as it conjoins North American and Caribbean emancipatory struggles. But I believe another possible answer lies in the availability of source materials, particularly for a Northern U.S. writer. While British fictionalizations of occult resistance drew upon decades of colonial ethnographic and natural history writing—multi-genre texts which themselves deploy their own demystifying rhetorical strategies and forms of fictionality, as Toni Wall Jaudon and Kelly Wisecup have shown[25]—there was no similar North American tradition for D'Arcy to emulate or maraud. Or, to be more specific, while such writing did exist in the early nineteenth century, it rarely depicted or expounded upon the non-Christian spiritual, mystical, or folk practices of enslaved peoples except occasionally to make a case for or against their Christianization. This is not to therefore repeat the assumption of early and mid-twentieth century historians that "black Caribbean and South American cultures exhibited greater incidences of 'Africanisms' relative to the black cultures of British North America"; historians of the spiritual and folk practices of enslaved Africans in North America like Young, Philip D. Morgan, Lawrence W. Levine, and Yvonne P. Chireau and have uncovered a great archive of trial records, petitions, almanacs, slave narratives, and "missionary intelligence"

[24] "Haiti and the New World Novel," p. 249.
[25] See Jaudon's "Obeah's Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn"; Jaudon and Wisecup's "On Knowing and Not Knowing about Obeah"; and Wisecup's "Knowing Obeah." See also Christopher P. Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions*, p. 25.

dispatches featuring "doctors" and their "strange cures," "conjurers," and even "Obees" and "Obers," illustrating both occult activity and interest in that activity across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[26] Rather, on my view, such accounts didn't enter the mainstream (at least in the North where D'Arcy wrote)[27] or come to be dwelled upon collectively and with great concern as they had in British colonial writing in the wake of Tacky's Revolt.

D'Arcy's near-immediate appropriation of Polidori's vampiric tale to make sense of black resistance to slavery's regimes indicates, to me, the felt absence of such a controlling discourse in the U.S. context. Supplying the master term "vampirism" to account for black occult power allowed D'Arcy to engage the deeply ambivalent British colonial literature while refiguring it, with comic overtones, for an American audience worried that there may be "Tackeys among us."[28] Not quite, D'Arcy's story replies. Only perhaps a "black vampire"—or two, as further suggested by a poem published by one "Goliah F'Arcy" shortly after *The Black Vampyre*'s publication. The joking "Ode" suggests that more "vampires" than the one D'Arcy leaves us with roam the city: addressed to "the sable regiment who daily sweeps our streets," the poem disparagingly jokes that one day "Uriah Derick D'Arcy shall inscribe / your highborn names among the Vampyre tribe."[29] The appearance of *The Black Vampyre* and its

[26] Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, p. 6; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, pp. 620-30; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 55-80; Chireau, *Black Magic*.

[27] We may in part see this as a result of the growing sectionalism of the early eighteenth century. As Trish Loughran argues, even as print culture "cultivated a sense of material simultaneity across national space," this "paradoxically produced an enhanced sense of regional difference. A growing sense of simultaneity, in other words, produced not nationalism but an ever more entrenched sectionalism" (*The Republic in Print*, p. 345). As a result, perhaps, we see a Northern writer like D'Arcy finding Edwards' account of the British Caribbean handiest (more available or trustworthy) to furnish his story of Saint Dominguan / Northern U.S. occult slave revolt.

[28] *Tacky's Revolt*, p. 244.

[29] *New-York Evening Post*, 12 August 1819, p. 2. Unknown whether "F'Arcy" was a second pseudonym for "D'Arcy" or if the poem was written by a fan.

attendant poem at a moment when the potentiality of slave rebellion in the U.S. felt particularly potent suggests that white anxiety found vent in a particularly literary mode, one that could sample details across disparate locales and digest them through a lighter, more Eurocentric framework.

This move to address a growing awareness of black occult practices and claims to supernatural power amidst heightened debates over domestic slavery in a self-consciously literary mode—one that could shelter imaginative, disingenuous, inconclusive, messy engagements with alarming ideas—marks an early instance of a practice that *Works like a Charm* goes on to explore. Across texts as politically opposed as the Denmark Vesey trial records and Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, I track a pattern wherein the literary becomes the privileged mode for airing, exploring, enacting, and challenging the threat of black occult power. Crucially, I will show, in these works the stakes of the conflict between black and white power are rendered more speculatively, distinct from secularism's mandates. If recent studies of secularity in the early- and nineteenth-century U.S. context have helpfully disenchanted us of the notion that something called "secularity" was ever achieved,[30] revealing the ways the categories of religion, secularity, and enchantment came to mutually constitute one another,[31] the central tension explored in many of these studies (whether it be between a Jamaican obeahman and a British colonist or between a Rochester spirit-rapper and her skeptic) is often framed as one between those who are striving towards

[30] Has this joke already been made?

[31] See especially John Lardas Modern's *Secularism in Antebellum America* and Emily Ogden's *Credulity*; also Peter Coviello's *Make Yourselves Gods*, Jared Hickman's *Black Prometheus*, Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Futures Past*, and Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment.*

secularity and those who are not. Emily Ogden, for example, writes that "modern enchantment is the negotiation between those who were aiming at modernity and those whom they see as nonmodern," pointing to instances—such as the introduction of mesmerism into New England factories to help attune the bodies of factory workers to the hours of the workday—where the relation between modern and nonmodern agents is not one of disenchantment but one of "managing" certain susceptible bodies to perform as needed.[32]

While I find this work exciting insofar as it disabuses critics of the notion that enchantment is necessarily radical (rather than retrograde), I find that it still prevents us from understanding the ambivalence at the heart of much of the literature I read here. If the central relation in the study of enchantment is still taken to be the relation of those who "believe" and those who don't, this prevents us from scrutinizing situations where multiple "enchantments" are in conflict—that is, where one person's occult behavior is discounted, but not via the language of secularity. In few of the texts I consider, D'Arcy's included, does "enlightened reason" trump "black conjuration." Rather, an occult field is navigated by figures racialized white and black in a contest of power: D'Arcy's revolutionary vampire is defeated by the stake, his forced conversion of the planters Mr. and Mrs. Personne into vampires undone by their commandeering of a restorative "potion" (35). This is not to say a story like D'Arcy's is any less dismissive than stridently secular refutations of black occult power—indeed, the point is to trivialize. Nonetheless, the articulation and envisioning of a contest for racial supremacy in self-consciously nonsecular (and in some cases non-Christian) terms, however tongue-in-cheek, warrants close attention—not least when such a formulation appears in the justification of the

[32] *Credulity*, p. 18.

state-sanctioned killing of an actual conjurer, as I discuss in chapter one.

Any claim to power that threatens to topple the order upon which hegemony rests is not going to be well represented by that hegemony's literature. An enslaved person's claim to invulnerability—freedom from white harm by means inaccessible to white knowledge—fundamentally challenges an order premised on total black subjugation. The record of such claims—ambivalently documented in nearly every place touched by the African slave trade—is difficult to contend with. There is the question of accuracy—was such a claim really made, and by whom? In the case of Gullah Jack, the conjurer of my first chapter who allegedly "couldn't be killed," such a fact was "known" about him, but according to trial documents he made no such confession. There is the question of mediation—Jaudon and Wisecup describe the archive by which historians of obeah have come to know it as "manifest[ing] [both] colonial attempts to transform obeah into a set of [manageable] practices … [and] the range of practices, beliefs, and knowledge that Africans employed as a form of power in the Atlantic world."[33] As Stephan Palmié reminds us, the "language deployed to capture such practices was saturated with violently antagonistic intent right from the start."[34] And there is a question of something like truth—could such power really be?

These are questions for the present as much as they were questions for the past. As scholars came to understand such claims not as evidence of "backwardness"—expressions of lag or ignorance in a demystified world—scholarship reoriented itself around the question of the

[33] "On Knowing and Not Knowing Obeah," p. 130.
[34] Afterward to *Obeah and Other Powers*, p. 317.

value of supernatural beliefs. Historians of slavery in the 1970s understood the power of occult practices among enslaved people to lie purely in the sense of difference and community it fostered among black slaves—a mode of relation interpreted by some to be accommodationist. Eugene D. Genovese, for example, casts this as a "tactical withdrawal into a black world that … presented no direct threat to the regime, for its formula for survival rested precisely on acceptance of the existing relationship of forces." Donald Matthews adds that conjure "could not assail slavery, since it explained away many of the problems of life as the work of evil spirits or a prankish devil." [35] Both account for conjure as a closed system circulating on a psychological register among a subset of superstitious slaves and fail to see how such a system could be capable of undermining or resisting plantation authority.

Adroitly contesting these claims that black folk traditions constituted mere distractions, withdrawals, or even accommodations to plantation life, Chireau argues instead that "supernatural traditions could support or encourage the enslaved to fight, rebel, escape, or commit destructive acts of sabotage."[36] She reminds us that in almost every slave narrative that claims to refute the power of conjure, we see an instance of a slave, bolstered by a hidden root or conjure-bag, protesting the authority of an overseer.[37] For Chireau, belief in magic cultivates the morale to resist, the "fundamental power of … ancestral beliefs," providing the means for "personal acts of defiance" more than for "collective confrontations."[38] This lifeline acted as a defense against the dehumanizing mechanisms of slavery and gave enslaved people the

[35] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 222-3 and Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 212-3.
[36] *Black Magic*, p. 160.
[37] Ibid., pp. 160-1 n13.
[38] Ibid., pp. 154, 68.

psychological "determination to engage in subversive activities."[39] While she does not dismiss the possibility of collective magical praxis, she interprets conjure's efficacy mainly as a bulwark against psychological destitution and thus a source for individually realized nonmagical acts of resistance (for example, escaping a plantation or challenging an overseer).

This more recent idea that belief is the source of "magic's" power—in its ability to prompt recognizably secular challenges to authority—as a method of recuperating that which used to be wielded as evidence of "primitivity" remains eminent. Understanding the power of belief to be collective rather than personal, Walter Rucker locates the conjurer's power in his or her ability to prompt "collective action and collaboration between African ethnic groups."[40] David Geggus writes of Revolutionary-era Haitian Vodun that, under the best circumstances, it "forged bonds and gave courage."[41] In recent years, some scholars have attempted explanations that avoid redescription into psychological or anthropological terms.[42] Responding to the difficulty of writing about obeah (as he describes it, a "dense mesh of social praxis with its representation")[43] as a practice distinct from the antagonistic language by which it appears, Palmié argues that perhaps the best we can do is to "[point] out what we, in fact, do not (and possibly cannot) know."[44] This approach perhaps resonates with an earlier pragmatic admission by Albert J. Raboteau on the topic of American conjurers: "The simple fact is that

[39] Ibid., pp. 15-17.
[40] "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion," p. 7.
[41] *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, p. 77.
[42] David Murray describes this approach in *Matter, Magic, and Spirit* as "materialist": he is interested in "exploring whether the word 'spiritual' could in many instances be replaced with a different term from another register altogether, such as the psychological or aesthetic" (8).
[43] *Obeah and Other Powers*, p. 317.
[44] Ibid., p. 333.

slave conjurers kept their credibility and their authority because their power worked. Whatever explanation the modern observer offers—outright poisoning, probable coincidence, psychosomatic suggestions, or psychic phenomenon—some became sick and some were cured by conjure."[45] Avoiding the urge to make a positive or ontological claim—to provide some answer to the stubborn question: "is magic real?"—these scholars hold open space for that possibility while refocusing attention to the complex world in which such practices operated: what forces they responded to, how those forces were variously articulated, the responses prompted by claims to supernatural power, and the words by which that power is constantly being articulated.

My intention in this work is not to challenge any particular interpretation of conjure's usefulness as a response to oppression, nor to debunk or somehow substantiate conjure's claims to supernaturally heal or harm. While my main interest lies in examining the means by which the spiritual and material practices of conjure have or have not been conceived as a larger-scale threat to white authority, I do feel it necessary to clarify my own approach to the question of occult power. I agree with critics like Alan Richardson who've shown that the category of "magic" has been used dismissively and in racist ways to ridicule the idea of black revolt by "denying a coherent ideology or political aspirations to black insurgents, representing them instead as 'savages,' stirred up by African sorcerers and … giving vent to uncontrollable, barbaric fury."[46] I also believe that the same forces have worked to make the notion of black

[45] *Slave Religion*, pp. 281-2. Young also eschews a strictly "rational" approach to understanding ritualistic and spiritual phenomena, treating his material in *Rituals of Resistance* as "the articulation of a subtle and imaginative spiritual complex replete with its own notions of spirit, the body, and its movement" (21).
[46] "Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797-1807," p. 12.

invulnerability to white harm unthinkable. I do not wish to take at their word the magistrates who "proved" Gullah Jack's vulnerability by murdering him, nor do I want to believe that the claim of his invulnerability can only be recuperated by recourse to secularized forms of explanation, even while I believe those explanations to be of great value. In *Works like a Charm,* I intend not to dismiss the possibility—felt, I believe, by many of the writers covered here—that Jack could be taken at his word.

Works like a Charm: The Occult Resistance of Nineteenth-Century American Literature builds from the insistence that, to track American belief in the viability of magic, one must attend to the literature of slave revolt. Across the Atlantic world, resistance movements against slavery headed by mystical leaders or incorporating occult elements, from oath-taking ceremonies to protective charms, raised questions about occult operations of power in a new and urgent way. In three chapters spanning the nineteenth century, I argue that the possibility such practices may have worked animated proslavery and abolitionist activists alike, though neither could accept such claims to revolutionary power at face value. Examining the methods by which that possibility was either suppressed or recast in terms more accessible to white epistemologies offers crucial insight into the limits of and the political and racial stakes behind not just American secularization but also the negotiation of "permissible" American enchantments.

My first chapter examines the widely publicized trial of Denmark Vesey, accused, in 1822, of leading a conspiracy to rise against the white, slaveholding population of Charleston, South Carolina. Among the accused was a figure whose treatment I especially attend to: the "sorcerer" Gullah Jack, or "the little man who can't be killed." I read the narrative figuration

of this insurrectionary conjurer alongside treatments of occult activity in eighteenth-century Caribbean colonial legislation and literature to argue that the Charleston magistrates, in their official reports on the conspiracy, saw themselves as participating in a larger Atlantic struggle against occult resistance to slavery. In handling the trial narratives, I follow a recent turn in nineteenth-century Americanist criticism led by Carrie Hyde to read the records not for their accuracy in describing the accused's intended actions but rather for what they disclose about what possible outcomes the magistrates did and did not deem possible. What is most striking about the trial, I argue, is not so much the supposed scale of the conspiracy, which at times was thought to include many hundreds of rebels, nor the open question of who its true authors really are—either the conspirators or a paranoid slaveholding class—but rather the fact that, well over a century after the Salem witch trials, Charleston magistrates found themselves with a sorcerer on trial. Yet, in an age necessitating judicial skepticism toward boasts of supernatural ability, Gullah Jack could hardly be charged with witchcraft. Rather, the magistrates cite his "*endeavoring* to enlist… all the powers of darkness." This astonishing accusation avoids confirming or denying such "powers," condemning instead the act of "endeavoring" toward their enlistment, an act apparently threatening enough to warrant a death sentence. I argue that this case is critically important for understanding the legacy of the conjurer and the way later texts assess the viability of occult resistance.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1856 *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* puts the potency of the conjurer's threat to antislavery use, taking up the figure of Vesey and elements from the conspiracy trial records to craft her rebellious titular character. The novel, central to my second chapter, casts Dred as Vesey's son and imbues him with the prophetic personality of Nat

Turner. Stowe attributes Dred's supernatural abilities—an almost irresistible influence over others, susceptibility to clairvoyant trances, and a near-perfect communion with the swamp and its creatures—not to any esoteric practices, like those practiced by Gullah Jack, but rather to Dred's "magnetic" nervous constitution, a language and a theory derived from mesmerism. The "philosophy of superstition" offered by mesmerists claimed to decode the supernaturalisms of foreign times, places, and cultures as effects of a universal magnetic fluid whose chance accumulations or disturbances could explain the formerly unexplainable, from ancient oracles and biblical miracles to the "fetish and obi" of the "African race." By taking up and Christianizing mesmerism's metadiscursive pretensions, Stowe develops a supernatural insurrectionary leader—one made in the mold of an Old Testament prophet but plotted in a lineage of "African sorcerers"—who undergoes mystical phenomena without relying on powers "occulted" from white knowledge. If Gullah Jack's power derives from "charms and amulets," Dred's "great instrument of influence" is the bible, a substitution that renders him less an arcane sorcerer than himself an "instrument of doom in a mightier hand." That is, Dred doesn't carry charms—his personality works *like a charm*. Connecting Stowe's novel to other works with "magnetic" leaders of slave revolt, such as Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, I trace a subgenre of American literary mesmerism which transformed culturally specific resistance practices into a distinctly American form of radical enchantment.

In my final chapter, I consider the legacy of this "mesmerization" of the insurrectionary conjurer in turn-of-the-century novels by Pauline Carrington Bouvé and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, works that have not previously been considered alongside one another. In Bouvé's

Their Shadows Before, a sympathetic retelling of the 1831 Southampton insurrection, a fictionalized Nat Turner employs his "magnetic" influence to rescue the novel's young white protagonist from the prophesied uprising. Bouvé follows Stowe in affirming her rebel's supernatural powers while ascribing them to more familiar sources. But while Stowe takes advantage of mesmerism's metadiscursive pretentions on the level of narration, Bouvé enlists her characters to provide such explanations; when the young protagonist suggests Nathaniel practices a type of "Voodoo," her Harvard-educated tutor describes Nathaniel's power as "possibly a case of mesmeric influence." This is abstracted a step further when Nathaniel describes his irresistible influence over his credulous followers as "a workman [using] his tools." In *Their Shadows Before*, the sorcerer's power ultimately lies in a combination of esoteric practice—mainly "hand-waving"—and facility in describing that practice to one's own advantage: as "voodoo," "mesmerism," "superstition," or something else, depending on one's purpose. When, at his death, Nathaniel bequeaths the white narrator a copy of his confessions—a fictionalization of the process by which Thomas Gray purportedly extracted the historical Nat Turner's "Confessions" in the days before his trial and death—he finally renders her the "workman" and his "testimony" the "tool" by which his prophecy will be fulfilled: on Bouvé's account, by the Civil War and emancipation. In Bouvé's post-Reconstruction moment, black occult power is finally consolidated into a white literary project with a conciliationist agenda. In direct contrast, Hopkins' novel reverses mesmerism's course. Her novel opens with a gifted mesmerist doctor passing for white in the North; by its close her protagonist is revealed to be the descendent of ancient Ethiopian royalty. His supernatural powers, previously described as "mesmeric," are revealed instead to originate in this ancient bloodline. If, in Bouvé's novel,

Nathaniel's occult power operates, ultimately, in service to white futures, Hopkins novel reverses the progress narrative told by mesmerists and mesmeric fiction to locate the source of black occult power—past, present, and future—in a still-living ancient Ethiopian kingdom. *Works like a Charm* argues that the two fates of the black occult figures in Bouvé's and Hopkins' novels can be read as the culmination of the ambivalence at the heart of the sorcerer on trial.

Chapter One

Killing the Man who Couldn't be Killed: White Magic and the Trial of Gullah Jack

"And if any Slave or Slaves shall compass or imagine the Death of any white Person, and thereof be attainted by open Deed before Two Justices and Three Freeholders, such Slave or Slaves shall suffer Death."
-"An Act for the better Order and Government of Slaves," Jamaica, 1696

"No means which experience or ingenuity could devise were left unessayed, to eviscerate the plot."
-Gov. Thomas Bennett's August 10, 1822 letter[1]

In the summer of 1822, only three years after the publication of *The Black Vampyre*, Charleston, South Carolina, had its own story to tell about supernatural black revolt. With the sudden appearance of the city's militia on Charleston streets in June, rumors began to circulate that authorities had halted an organized rebellion of unknown proportions in the nick of time. Alleged conspirators, nearly all enslaved men, disappeared into the work-house in droves to await quick trials and, in many cases, execution or transportation outside of the U.S. While speculation ran rampant, little was publicly "revealed" about the threat or the trials until after they were well underway. It wasn't until after the second set of executions that newspapers began to report that a conjurer had been prominent among the ranks of rebels, one who claimed "he could not be hurt nor killed by any means whatever, but a blow from him would do instant execution." At a "ceremony of witchcraft" performed before his apprehension, the

[1] "An Act," pp. 77-8; Letter: *National Daily Intelligencer*, 24 August 1822. Letter also can be found in *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History*, pp. 467-71.

conjurer had presided over the communal shredding of a roast fowl: thus "so do we pull the Buckra to pieces."[2] The public had little to fear, however: for "poor [J]ack has been hung, and satisfied his companions that he could be killed." Thus, the "little man who couldn't be killed" made his entrance into the white U.S. imaginary post-mortem.

Gullah Jack wasn't the first conjurer found to be involved in a rebellion, nor the first to be tried or killed. Oath-taking and protective conjuring played a role in the New York slave revolt of 1712,[3] while a 1741 conspiracy in the same city allegedly involved a "negro doctor" named Harry who was to supply the conspirators with combustibles and poison.[4] Closer to home, a Charleston newspaper reported in 1793 that "a negro man" was tried for "*witch-craft!* before two magistrates and several freeholders, who condemned him to be hanged."[5] Gullah Jack's case was far and away the most prominent, however. Because of public and private disagreements among city authorities regarding the scope of the alleged conspiracy, the legitimacy of the closed-door trials, and the dissemination of information about the trials to the public, the events of the summer of 1822 have a rich and complicated life in print. Despite the fact that most of the accused never admitted to the existence of any conspiracy, accounts of the plot and its dismantling at the hands of the court proliferated nationally, with the

[2] This text was printed in several newspapers across the North and South; the earliest copy I can find was printed in the *Connecticut Courier* on July 31, 1822, p. 3.
[3] See Walter Rucker, "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion," p. 86.
[4] Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York Conspiracy*, especially pp. 233, 265, 277, and 383. Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker's *Official Narrative* cites the trial of the New York conspirators, as well as another conspiracy trial in 1736 Antigua (which, incidentally, also involved obeahmen), as precedents for their decision to conduct private trials (vii).
[5] *City Gazette*, 1 November 1793, p. 3, emphasis in original. Unfortunately I haven't been able to locate further details about this case.

"impossible to overlook" figure of Gullah Jack often receiving as much attention as the conspiracy's alleged leader, Denmark Vesey (*A* 23).[6]

To study Gullah Jack is thus to study a many-layered figure. There is the historical person, born in Africa, captured into slavery, and sent to Charleston in 1806, just before the enactment of the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves the following year. Zephaniah Kingsley, who "purchased" Jack in Zanzibar, claimed Jack "had his conjuring implements with him in a bag which he brought on board the ship and always retained them"—though he made this observation in 1828, years after Jack's death.[7] Jack would have been about thirty when he was hung in Charleston, and he seems to have professed his innocence to the end. Then, there is the Jack who appears in witness testimony and the court's sentencing—accounts of and responses to Jack written while he was still alive. According to a number of witnesses, he was known throughout the city's black population as a "doctor" who carried a charm and couldn't be killed, and who promised to render the rebels invulnerable, too (*OR* 103). The magistrates singled out Jack in their sentencing, noting that his claims excited "no emotion in the mind of the intelligent and enlightened, but contempt and disgust" (*A* 48). Finally, there are the representations of Jack that originated after his death, some of which were authored by the very men who sentenced him. While it is clear from their death sentence that the court

[6] In parenthetical citations, I refer to the two "official" accounts of the conspiracy by their first initials: James Hamilton, Jr.'s *Account of the late intended insurrection among a portion of the blacks of the city of Charleston, South Carolina* (2nd ed., J.W. Ingraham, 1822) and Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker's *Official report of the trials of sundry Negroes charged with an attempt to raise an insurrection in the state of South-Carolina: preceded by an introduction and narrative and, in an appendix, a report of the trials of four white persons on indictments for attempting to excite the slaves to insurrection* (James R. Schenck, 1822).

[7] *A treatise on the patriarchal or co-operative system of society as it exists in some governments and colonies in America and in the United States under the name of slavery, with its necessity and advantages*, p. 13. Quoted in Lois A. Walker and Susan R. Silverman, *A Documented History of Gullah Jack Pritchard,* p. 4. For more biographical details, see pp. 1-9.

recognized Jack as a conjurer to be dealt with, the richest and most complex accounts of Jack's supposed life as a rebel conjurer, and particularly his courtroom demeanor, were produced after his death.

As I see it, this timeline matters because a great deal of the work of "killing the man who couldn't be killed" in fact occurred after his death. As mentioned earlier, the public only came to know Jack as purportedly invulnerable after he was hung at the hands of the state. Having killed him, thereby quelling for themselves any anxiety that his boasts might be true, Charleston officials set to work formulating the meaning of the work they had done. As I hope to show, killing the insurrectionary conjurer was in part a literary project—one intimately tied to the pomp of the court and the awful violence of the white plantocratic state. The widespread circulation of Jack's boast and the court's sentence in the days and months after his death was an attempt to render not Jack's but the Charleston court's power the stuff of legends.

A Courtroom Drama

The tribunal assembled to try the conspirators—both free black and enslaved—consisted of two magistrates and five freeholders, following a 1740 South Carolina law itself modeled after the Jamaica Slave Act of 1684.[8] The freeholders selected in this case were some of the wealthiest and most prominent planters in Charleston: one of the freeholders, Nathaniel Heyward, was "one of the largest slaveholders in the antebellum south," keeping over two thousand people in

[8] See Edward B. Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," and Vincent Brown, "Spiritual Terror," p. 31.

enslavement across seventeen plantations.[9] The law provided little direction for how trials of enslaved and free blacks should be conducted. While under oath, the court was given latitude to follow or break with standard juridical procedure according to their discretion, notoriously in this case choosing closed-door proceedings. Even so, all eyes were on Charleston, from a planter class deeply invested in the entrenchment of domestic slavery to a growing number of Northern abolitionists—one of whom decried the "committee of prejudiced, frightened, incensed individuals" who exercised "ignorant and arbitrary tyranny" in their murdering of the alleged rebels.[10] A letter from Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr., to Attorney General Robert Young Hayne dated July 1st reveals his "anxious" concern that the proceedings are running against the "immutable rule[s] of Courts exercising criminal jurisdiction"—to which Hayne responds with the reminder that "however [his] judgment may disapprove… [t]he Executive is certainly not bound to examine into Judicial errors."[11]

Criticism of the proceedings began simultaneously with the assembly of the court. Published just days after the court convened, an anonymously written "anecdote" titled "Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement" described the "legal murder" of a slave named Billy as a result of an insurrection scare a decade prior. A drunken cavalryman, stationed to meet a revolt that never came, blew a note into a trumpet that the surrounding countryside all believed to portend insurrection. Billy, who happened to possess a cobweb-filled horn, was roused from sleep, brought to trial, and sentenced to execution, despite an urgent appeal from

[9] For biographical information on the magistrates and freeholders, see Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette's *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History*, pp. 90, 160-61.
[10] See the letter by "Crispus" printed in the *Republican Compiler* of Gettysburg, 13 November 1822 (printed in Egerton and Paquette, pp. 517-20).
[11] For the exchange, see Egerton and Paquette, pp. 147-52.

another judge. The author of "Melancholy Effect," later revealed to be Supreme Court Justice (and brother-in-law to Governor Bennett) William Johnson, Jr., hoped the story "might check the causes of agitation which were then operating upon the public mind."[12] The court responded furiously, both in private letters and public rejoinders. Johnson, who claimed he penned the piece before learning a court had even been assembled, defended his honor. The dispute went unresolved, with much of city defending the court. Nevertheless, as a result of the controversy, the court was compelled to assert its power and legitimacy with every pronouncement. One official narrative of the trial even prints in full the sections of South Carolina's "Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and Slaves," which outlines the creation of ad hoc slave courts. Whether the court was presided over in spirit by "Judge Lynch," as an anonymous critic would later say, the magistrates and freeholders certainly sought the appearance of judicial due process.[13]

Much of what we "know" about the Charleston conspiracy and trials comes from two sources: a 48-page pamphlet titled *An account of the late intended insurrection…* published by Charleston Intendant James Hamilton, Jr., in mid-August and an expanded 200-page *Official report of the trials of sundry Negroes…* published by two of the presiding magistrates, Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, a few months later.[14] The second document pulls from the first, and both pull from clerk-produced documents from the trial—though the sections of the documents that purport to contain verbatim trial transcripts in fact contain heavily edited snippets of testimonies and confessions rearranged to create narrative coherency and make the

[12] *Charleston Courier*, 21 June 1822.
[13] See pamphlet by "A Colored American" (New York, 1850) reprinted in Egerton and Paquette, pp. 735-39.
[14] For full titles, see footnote 6. Hereafter referred to as *Account* and *Official Report.*

court's decisions seem defensible.[15] More fascinatingly the authors of both documents present their own "historical account" of the conspiracy, "embracing" unrecorded, anecdotal, "very interesting" information which is otherwise "within the knowledge … of the Court alone" (*OR* iv). The writers create a full-fledged dramatic arc, going so far as to produce a biography of Vesey's life beginning in 1781, when he was momentarily enslaved on the island of Saint-Domingue. They wax speculative here, too: "how near he was to the chance of being distinguished in the bloody events of San Domingo" (*A* 17). According to Kennedy and Parker, in a particularly stunning display of subjunctive acrobatics, the city of Charleston has the apparently prophetic power of its authorities to thank for their peace: "Had the plot not been discovered, and the Insurrection commenced at the appointed time," the conspirators "would not have been found unarmed" (*OR* 34). Thanks to the court's prescience, "Carolina has been rescued from the most horrible catastrophe" (*OR* 59). In language all their own, the magistrates summon an image of the conspiracy's alleged leader, Denmark Vesey, poised "to riot in blood, outrage, rapine, and conflagration, and to introduce anarchy and confusion in their most horrid forms." To head off such devastation, they determine to make his life "a just and necessary sacrifice, at the shrine of indignant justice" (*OR* 177).

Shortly after the uprising was supposed to have taken place, thirty-five men, all but Vesey enslaved, were sentenced to death, while another thirty-seven free and enslaved men were sentenced to permanent transportation outside of South Carolina or banishment from

[15] Egerton and Paquette's *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History* provides a useful overview and timeline on pp. 155-6. Michael P. Johnson goes into fascinating detail about the nature of the edits in his essay "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators."

the United States.[16] And yet, the trial documents would have us believe that the "real" violence had been avoided, conjuring for anxious Charleston readers a "complete" account of the conspirators' plans, their motives, their recruitment strategies, and even their inner trembling as they faced death at the gallows (*OR* v). To quote Stephen Best's writing on the presence of "rumor in the archive," "the text participates in the construction of the reality it seeks to destroy," rendering it "present only as an effect of its deferral and denial." What matters here is not truth or falsity, but the "rhetorical effects" of such a record.[17] In a real sense, as Michael P. Johnson has argued, the court authored the (deferred) conspiracy for and by themselves.

Insurrectionary Materials

Establishing the appearance of judicial legitimacy required the court to develop some kind of evidentiary standard for trying an alleged conspiracy—a plot overheard. The plans allegedly made their way to Charleston officials' ears when a last-minute recruitment effort at a Saturday market led an alarmed slave to alert authorities that "a revolt and insurrection were in contemplation among a proportion at least of our black population" (*A* 3). After a wave of detainments and the deployment of the City Guard, some of the captured men, likely under duress, began to testify to the existence of an extensive plot. Yet most of the alleged "principal officers" of this plot, including Vesey, died professing their innocence, and the only "weapons" brought before the court were a dozen hoop-poles that were supposedly to be transformed into

[16] From a letter by Governor Bennett dated 10 August 1822, published in the *National Daily Intelligencer* on 24 August 1822. These numbers vary slightly by account.
[17] *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, pp. 117, 131.

pikes (*OR* 20, 32).[18] As exemplified in the subjunctive contortions shown earlier, the official narrators of the proceedings are left to rely chiefly on counterfactual and speculative modes to justify the court's decisions. Thus, when the hoop-poles appear in evidence, as Carrie Hyde's reading of the trial documents shows, Kennedy and Parker handle them not as mere poles but rather as the pikes they hadn't yet become: "latent props of destruction," the "inert embodiment of unrealized intent" ("Novelistic Evidence," 39). As Hyde argues, the court sought some way to render an evidentiary basis for trying something so elusive as conspiracy—hence their handling of the hoop-poles—in order to restore legitimacy to the proceedings. The "ineluctable … materialist logic of evidence" pushed the magistrates to "materialize" the unrealized threat through counterfactuals and conjecture, even grasping after Vesey's tears as he broke down at his sentencing as "evidence of his guilt"—a palpable "substitute for the unequivocal disclosure that the magistrates desire" (40).

Not all materials could be handled equally, however. For this turn to counterfactuals that Hyde so lucidly describes is subtended by a thoroughly secular causality: the would-be pikes would have punctured their victims in just such a way. But what of objects that threatened a much different form of harm? While Charleston officials were willing to imbue twelve wooden poles with radiant, violent potential, they responded quite ambivalently when confronted with another set of insurrectionary tools: Gullah Jack's "boasted charms" (*OR* 179). Jack was allegedly rich with material evidence. For one thing, it would have been simple enough to ask Jack to exhibit his "charm," or even to search him for it: it was said he "carried

[18] Hoop-poles were a common commodity made from flexible stripped saplings, commonly used in the construction of barrels.

[it] about him" at all times (*OR* 52-3). Yet, the magistrates don't seem to ask. Jack promised to render the rebel army invulnerable, as well; this was to be accomplished through administering a special diet of parched corn and ground nuts, consumed "on the morning it breaks out," and instructing the men to carry "cullahs" or crab-claws in their mouths for the duration of the battle (*OR* 24, 103). One witness even mentions refusing to return his crab-claw to Jack, suggesting the witness still possessed it—but the magistrates, so hungry for material evidence that they are willing to conjure it themselves, don't inquire about any of these materials, either (*OR* 103). This would be one thing if the court determined to handle Jack as they did any other conspirator; they certainly had this option. Across multiple testimonies, we also see Jack carrying pike heads and hiding gunpowder, committing to procure arms, and recruiting others to help him poison wells across the city. The standards by which the court justified the killing of numerous other conspirators would have applied just as well to Jack had the mention of his claimed invincibility been excised entirely—indeed, two witnesses testify to believing that Jack, not Vesey, was the conspiracy's "head man."[19]

[19] Despite such testimony, and evidence elsewhere that Gullah Jack planned to continue with the planned revolt after Vesey's imprisonment (see *OR* 56), the official accounts go out of their way to attribute Jack's participation in the conspiracy to *Vesey*'s shrewdness. The narrative that precedes Kennedy and Parker's *Report* puts it thusly: "In the selection of his leaders, Vesey showed great penetration and sound judgment. … Gullah Jack was regarded as a sorcerer, and as such feared by the natives of Africa, who believe in witchcraft" (24). Hamilton's *Account* states this even more firmly: "Vesey, who left no engines of power unessayed, seems, in an early stage of his design, to have turned his eye on this necromancer, aware of his influence with his own countrymen, who are distinguished both for their credulous superstition and clannish sympathies" (24). This tendency to credit Vesey for Gullah Jack's influence in the plot has continued even through contemporary accounts—Edward Pearson's *Designs Against Charleston* is exemplary on this point: "Seen in this light and assisted in this project by 'Gullah' Jack, Vesey emerges as an agent of cultural revitalization who forged a new political discourse of rebellion from ethnic African practices and customs, militant Old Testament Christianity, and the language of revolutionary emancipationism" (128). Gullah Jack's "African practices and customs" are subsumed under what are taken to be Vesey's more expansive politics of rebellion.

But the trial documents deliberately frame Jack not as any other conspirator, but rather as the conspiracy's insurrectionary conjurer—a framing that would seem to place them in a strange bind. For to submit the conjurer's charms to examination in the midst of a trial the adjudication of which leans on counterfactual evidence ("the rebels would not have been found unarmed") would require the court to entertain the existence of a future in which those charms might indeed have supernatural power (Jack would not have been found *uncharmed*)—evidence not just speculative, but nearly spectral, recalling the long since denounced admission in the 1692 Salem witch trials of testimonies recounting seeming impossibilities. In a putatively secular courtroom, the magistrates would be forced to admit that, unlike the wooden poles-qua-pikes, the charms would *not* have worked as claimed, thus tripping up their counterfactual proceedings and giving Jack a unique "out." There would appear no way to condemn a conspiratorial conjurer on the basis of counterfactual evidence without thereby affirming his latent supernatural power.

How are we to understand the fact that the court neither examines Jack's evidence, nor lets him go free? In this chapter, I propose that the treatment of the "little man who can't be killed" across the trial documents constitutes more than an error of judgment, or an unwitting disclosure that Jack's charms troubled the court more than they dared admit. Rather, the literature of the conspiracy configures Jack's death not as juridical punishment for participating in a conspiracy against the city, but instead as the production of evidence that the court's power triumphantly surpassed the "invincible" conjurer's–or, put more provocatively, as an act of ritual counter-magic against his charms.

The trial of an insurrectionary conjurer presented Charleston's white planter elite a unique set of opportunities. First, the opportunity to develop and deploy a set of protocols for handling occult insurrectionary behavior in the midst of an Atlantic world where such resistance appeared ubiquitous. Living in a black-majority city, the second largest (after New Orleans) in a region actively renewing its investments in racialized slavery, Charleston officials saw in this conspiracy trial an opportunity to anticipate and preempt modes of black resistance already evident in the Caribbean. As I will show, this involved both an apparent sampling of language from anti-occult legislation developed in the French and British Caribbean as well as the dramatic staging of Jack in the courtroom as, by turns, a self-deceived "African" and a humiliated conman, characterizations perhaps familiar to the officials from British fiction and drama. Second, focusing on Jack's status as an invincible conjurer, one at the mercy of the white authority he purportedly planned to destroy, allowed the court to appropriate the notion of invincibility for themselves. If Gullah Jack personifies the threat of a future in which black soldiers could be impervious to white harm, then his death at the hands of the court becomes both evidence for and an assertion of white imperviousness to black harm (recall how "miraculously" the city of Charleston was spared). By attending to the magistrates' deeply ambivalent reckoning with the conspiracy's alleged conjurer, I hope to bring this plot—the rendering of Charleston authority as itself charmed with invincibility—into view.

Anti-Occult Legislation

Of course, the Charleston officials would not have described their work in the terms I've used here. As mentioned earlier, the court was deeply concerned with establishing at least the

appearance of judicial due process. To this end, the Charleston magistrates leaned rhetorically upon legislative tactics that French and British colonial authorities had developed across the Caribbean to manage occult resistance, connecting (though not explicitly) the trial of Gullah Jack to a larger and longer Atlantic struggle against occult-inflected revolt. Some of these tactics already had been directly imported into South Carolina's 1740 slave code, which lifted verbatim from seventeenth-century Jamaican and Barbadian slave codes, and others had not. Yet, my reading finds the magistrates revealing their awareness of a broad array of legislative tactics whether or not they were actually built into South Carolina law. A brief survey of anti-occult legislation across the Caribbean will, I hope, help situate their Charleston courtroom in a larger Atlantic context.

In the century before the Charleston conspiracy trials, a great number of slave revolts and resistance movements were headed by mystical or spiritual leaders and incorporated occult elements. British-ruled Jamaica struggled for decades against the obeah leadership of Nanny of the Maroons and the guerrilla banditry of Jack Mansong (or Three-Fingered Jack, fictionalized in William Earle's 1800 novel), while obeah-men filled the ranks of Tacky's Rebellion in 1760.[20] In Saint-Domingue, maroon leader and mystical rebel François Mackandal became so legendary that magical "paquets ficelés" carried for protection from white harm, among other purposes, came to bear his name.[21] The alleged role of Vodun ceremony or "sorcery" in the August 1791 insurrection that began the Haitian Revolution became more widely known with

[20] See especially pp. 18-23 of Srinivas Aravamudan's introduction to *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack.*
[21] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le Vent*, 4:222.

the publication of Antoine Dalmas' *Histoire de la revolution de Saint-Domingue* in 1814.[22] In the North American colonies, oath-taking and protective conjuring played a role in the New York slave revolt of 1712,[23] while a 1741 conspiracy in the same city allegedly involved a "negro doctor" named Harry who was to supply the conspirators with combustibles and poison.[24]

The close association between large-scale insurrection and occult practices in the eighteenth century heightened white colonial anxiety over behaviors they had previously described "in tones of ethnographic interest," according to historian Diana Paton.[25] Yet, as is made clear in Paton's meticulous and thoughtful study of British and French legislation against the esoteric spiritual practices of enslaved people in the Atlantic colonies, what to do with that anxiety was a particularly knotty question. For one thing, it was slightly out of date. By the end of the seventeenth century, countries across Europe had begun to decriminalize witchcraft and, at least among elites, skepticism around supernatural phenomena was much more in vogue. The challenge was to develop legislation against a set of practices that colonial authorities did not understand without explicitly affirming practitioners' claims to supernatural power.

As Paton's comparative study shows, colonial authorities across the Caribbean sometimes replicated and sometimes diverged from their neighbors' methods of navigating this state of affairs. One method was to isolate and legislate against particular behaviors that

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[22] For example: "It was to the mysterious, or secret order of the Vadoux, a half-religious institution of African origin, that the success of the Haitian revolution was due." ("From our New York Correspondent," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* 11 May 1855.)
[23] See Walter Rucker, "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion," p. 86.
[24] Horsmanden, *The New-York conspiracy*. See especially pp. 233, 265, 277, and 383.
[25] "Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery," p. 250.

comprised or were proximal to African rituals. By this method, a behavior is extracted from its larger spiritual or cultural context and forbidden by law, while the justification for such legislation recasts the threat posed by that act in secular terms—that is, what's cast as threatening is not the spiritual or mystical context from which the behavior is extracted, but rather, that the act is being used as pretext for explicitly insurrectionary designs. For example, beginning with a provision in the 1676 Barbadian slave code, English slave codes in Jamaica, Antigua, South Carolina, and Georgia prohibited slaves from drumming—and, to quote the 1740 South Carolina provision, from "blow[ing] horns, and us[ing] any other loud instruments." [26] This allowed slaveholders to intervene in ceremonies and confiscate instruments under the pretext that they may be used to "call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs" or summon slaves to cross plantation lines, reducing the use of drums to a means of long-distance coordination. [27] Similarly, Tennessee state law forbade slaves from practicing medicine (at a time when such a practice was synonymous with the art of "conjuration"), via the reasoning that "a slave under the pretense of practicing medicine, might convey intelligence from one plantation to another, of a contemplated insurrectionary movement." [28]

Another method, and one which distinguishes British from French colonial law, was to outlaw an entire spiritual or mystical complex using non-European terminology. After Tacky's Rebellion in 1760, Jamaican legislators outlawed the practice of obeah. Obeah, which Jaudon

[26] See Act XXXVI copied on page 10 of *The Statutes At Large of South Carolina*. See also Paton (250-51), Jerome S. Handler, "Slave Revolts and Conspiracies in Seventeenth-Century Barbados" and Dena J. Epstein, "African Music in British and French America," especially pp. 78-9.
[27] *Statues*, p. 410.
[28] Quoted in Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, p. 165. See also Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, p. 139.

describes as "a complex of creole African religious and medicinal practices,"[29] was often glossed as synonymous with witchcraft in colonial texts; in Benjamin Moseley's *Treatise on Sugar*, for example, he describes the "magic" or "occult science of OBI" of fugitive slaves as "what we call the *black art*, which they brought with them from Africa," full of "sigils, spells, and sorcery."[30] While such an equation between African- and European-derived practices could appear in a popular ethnographic text, legislators had to be more circumspect, as the passage of the 1736 Witchcraft Act had "effectively decriminalized" witchcraft in England. According to Paton, this likely explains "the unusual British Caribbean decision to give legal status to an African-derived term rather than to interpret African spiritual activity under the rubrics of poisoning or witchcraft."[31] This vocabulary swap allowed authorities to prohibit behaviors and activities that threatened their power in ways they couldn't quite account for without professing to an outmoded belief in something called "witchcraft" or "sorcery." While this gave legislators this ability to persecute a broad range of spiritual, medicinal, and protective practices under one heading, it also "gave particular force to the activity named by that term" (237). This perhaps helps explain why the term "obeah," which had been in use throughout North America[32] and the Caribbean, fell out of use in North America over the course of the nineteenth century and has come to be associated particularly with Jamaica. To outlaw obeah gave it a cohesion in the eyes of white authority that it didn't have elsewhere. At

[29] "Obeah's Sensations," p. 715. As obeah is sometimes described as belonging to the same category as Vodun or Santería, I would add to this Aravamudan's distinction that obeah comparatively "kept its distance from Christianity" (43).
[30] 2nd edition, p. 189.
[31] "Witchcraft," p. 237, 258.
[32] See Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* for some examples of the use of the term "obi" (and variations) found in use in eighteenth-century North America (620).

the same time, legislators in North America who did not adopt the Jamaican method of outlawing the practice of obeah—or any other esoteric system, for that matter—may have sought some distance from the term for that very reason. In any case, behaviors associated with what came to be called "conjuring" in the U. S. continued to be outlawed in a more piecemeal fashion.

Although Jamaican anti-obeah laws were unusual in the Atlantic context, French and British colonial authorities developed an alternative, European-derived catch-all term for criminalizing occult behavior among slaves: "pretending". Though it wasn't adopted in North American slave codes, it does make a curious appearance in the *Official Report.* During Gullah Jack's appearance before the court, the report claims, he "positively denied that he ever pretended to be a Doctor or a Conjurer" (*OR* 105). That he denies ever having *pretended to be*, rather than actually being, a conjurer is curious; one is tempted to imagine the conjurer cleverly affirming his power by denying his art is artifice—there's nothing "pretend" happening here. More likely, the language simply reflects the question or accusation the magistrates put to him: *have you ever pretended to be a conjurer?* This phrasing may mean little in the context of South Carolina slave law, where an affirmative answer would not constitute confession to a punishable crime. Yet, the language echoes Jamaican legislation passed after Tacky's Rebellion calling for "death, imprisonment or exile [for] 'any Negro who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power,'" [33] as well as French colonial orders against "pretended Diviners,

[33] Quoted in Vincent Brown, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society," p. 38.

Sorcerers, and Composers of [magical] packets"[34] issued at the height of French fear over the influence of Haitian maroon leader and Vodun priest Mackandal. Paton argues that the appearance of this "distancing term" in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British and French law served to emphasize colonial governments' determined disbelief in occult behaviors even while they continued to criminalize them.[35] The term would seem to have the same function in the case against Gullah Jack, save for the fact that "pretended conjuration" was never a punishable offence under South Carolina's own slave code.

It was, however, a crime in South Carolina warranting no more than "fifty stripes" for any "negroes, or other slaves (commonly called doctors)," to "administer any medicine, or *pretended* medicine, to any other slave."[36] There is nothing to suggest the magistrates considered Jack's conjuring materials to be "pretended medicine," or even that they had this law in mind during Jack's trial—rather, this charge would more likely have been leveled against someone suspected of poisoning. Fear of poisoning at the hands of slaves ran high throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; during the second half of the eighteenth century, it was the second most common crime for which slaves in Virginia were tried, and six separate acts in South Carolina's slave code were dedicated specifically to preventing the administering of poison and the spreading of "knowledge of any poisonous root, plant, herb, or other sort of poison whatever."[37]

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[34] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le Vent*, 4:222 (my translation). Quoted in Paton, p. 255.
[35] Paton, p. 255.
[36] *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7:423 (my emphasis).
[37] Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia,* p. 95. See Acts VII-XII of the South Carolina slave code, printed in *The Statutes At Large of South Carolina* (422-23). See also Alan D. Watson, North Carolina Slave Courts, 1712-1785," pp. 24-36, especially 30.

Oddly enough, although testimony against Jack explicitly mentioned a poisoning plot, this is the one piece of information that both the *Account* and the *Official Report* censor. Both accounts decide to print Harry Haig's testimony, but where he mentions Jack's plan to give him poison, the plot is replaced with asterisks.

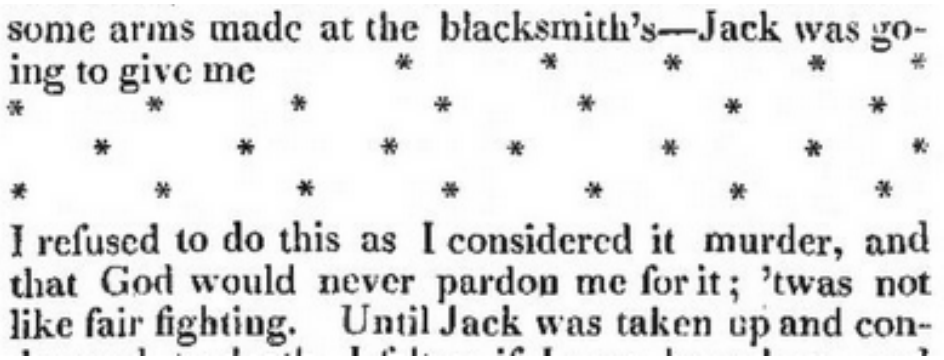
some arms made at the blacksmith's—Jack was going to give me * * * * *
* * * * * * * *
* * * * * * * *
* * * * * * *
I refused to do this as I considered it murder, and that God would never pardon me for it; 'twas not like fair fighting. Until Jack was taken up and con-

Figure 1: from the *Official Report* (107)

We know from other documents that this refers to a plan to poison the wells, though this plan is censored from both narratives—very likely due to the widespread panic rumors of the conspiracy had caused in Charleston[38]—and does not appear in Jack's sentence.[39] Rather, the sentence mentions his "wicked designs" (echoing language from the provision against drumming), his appeal to the "powers of darkness," his employment of "disgusting mummery and superstition," and his claims to invulnerability (*A* 50, *OR* 179).

Yet, I would argue that the authors of Jack's sentence and the official narratives still sought to make use of anti-poison legislation by a more meandering route. According to South

[38] As is illustrated in a letter by Governor Bennett: "During the interesting period occupied by the court first organized, the public mind was agitated by a variety of rumors, calculated to produce great excitement and alarm. … It is easy to perceive what pernicious consequences may ensue from not applying the proper corrective" ("Servile Conspiracy in South Carolina." *National Daily Intelligencer*, 24 August 1822).

[39] See Lois A. Walker and Susan R. Silverman, *A Documented History of Gullah Jack Pritchard and the Denmark Vesey Slave Insurrection of 1822*, pp. 171, 291, letter reprinted on 270.

Carolina law, the knowledge that Jack had "the intention" to poison is not admissible if the person testifying is enslaved, as Harry Haig was. Further, when poison is mentioned in the Slave Code, it seems to refer only to substances that have the capacity to harm: "any mineral or vegetable poison" or "medicines or drugs" from an apothecary.[40] But other laws throughout the Caribbean were much looser with regard to substances employed with intent to harm. Jamaica's 1696 slave code, for example, "made the use of poison by enslaved people a capital crime, whether or not it caused harm and whether or not the intended victim actually took the poison," while an act issued by the Bermuda Assembly in 1764 determined that, while "certain compositions" laid "where white people dwell … may not actually be found to be of a poisonous nature, yet as they are laid with an intent to affect some person, or persons, it ought to be esteemed highly criminal."[41] In both cases, but particularly in the latter, the category of poison is expanded to include any substance that a person *believes* will cause harm, and the charge applies whether or not the substance is administered in ways that white medical authority would recognize as efficacious. This wording allows for the criminalization of certain acts and objects—fetishes, mackandals, conjure-bags, charms—that white authority nevertheless did not wish to recognize as supernaturally powerful.[42]

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[40] *Statutes*, p. 423.

[41] Paton, p. 251; "Act for the Better Government of Negroes Mulattoes and Indians, Bond or Free," 1764, Bermuda Archives, *Private Acts 1704-94*, 84-85, quoted in Paton, p. 252.

[42] James H. Sweet illustrates the confusion between poison and witchcraft in the Brazilian context: "Because the majority of African malevolence still fell under the broad label of 'witchcraft,' poisonings often were subsumed under this banner. From the Portuguese perspective, poisoning became just another form of African *feitiços*" (*Recreating Africa*, 169). Yvonne P. Chireau describes a similar conjunction in the U.S.: "Within trial accounts, depositions, and court reports spanning the Chesapeake region and the lower South, Conjurers were regularly identified as responsible for creating and administering poisons. In fact, the roles of poisoners and that of supernatural practitioners appear in some cases to be identical" (*Black Magic*, 69).

The ambivalence with which the magistrates, in their death sentence, treat Jack's own supernatural belief suggests they had in mind this method of dealing with Jack's claims to supernatural power. Although most of the sentence accuses Jack of manipulating the superstition of those around him—"employ[ing] … the most disgusting mummery and superstition"—they also permit the possibility that Jack, himself, believed: "In the persecution of your wicked designs," they write, "you were not satisfied with resorting to natural and ordinary means, but endeavored to enlist on your behalf, all the powers of darkness"—powers which, they later add, "cannot rescue you from your approaching fate!"[43] "Endeavored to enlist" seems to me of a different order entirely than "representing" or pretending claims to supernatural power. Rather, this suggests something along the lines of the Bermuda act—as the "powers of darkness" were "enlisted" with the *intent* to harm, the court need not affirm their potency to still find threat in the gesture. It should be mentioned that this accusation does not seem to refer to Jack's poisoning plot, as the sentence pays special attention to Jack's "boasted charms" which could not preserve himself nor "protect others." It would instead seem to refer to Jack's own "charm"[44] and the parched corn, ground nuts, and crab claws which he claimed would bestow invulnerability—materials they would not handle as evidence but which are obliquely referred to here.

Of course, even if I am correct that the magistrates had this notion of prosecutable poison in mind when they crafted Jack's sentence, it still would not have been actionable under South Carolina law. I suggest the riffing of Caribbean anti-occult legislation here

[43] I quote from the *Official Report* (179), which differs slightly in wording, capitalization, and punctuation from the version published in the *Account* (50).
[44] The "charm" is mentioned on 87 of the *Official Report* but is never further explained.

because I believe it reveals the magistrates' own sense that what was happening in Charleston seemed dangerously linked to insurrectionary occult phenomena elsewhere, and they sought the appearance of judicial authority over it. At the same time, it was a link they sought to suppress, as if Charleston were exceptionally immune to such a threat. Thus, while we see evidence that the Charleston magistrates likely employed the language and forms of British and French colonial methods for prosecuting conjuration without affirming its supernatural potency, they do so without making explicit reference to them.

Conjure Fictions

"Laws have been made in the West Indies to punish this *Obian* practice with death," writes Moseley the *Treatise on Sugar*, "but they have been impotent and nugatory. Laws constructed in the West Indies, can never suppress the effect of ideas, the origin of which is in the centre of Africa" (194).[45] Anti-occult legislation may have made it more difficult for enslaved Africans to participate in rituals that were vital to survival, but it did very little to bring about the governable world that white colonial authorities wished to occupy. Observers like Moseley sought ways to describe the persistence of opaque behaviors without admitting any challenge to the Enlightenment rationality that justified their supremacy, in this case by ascribing belief in the efficacy of "Obian practice" to a distant time and place: primitive Africa. In the words of Jaudon, according to these "obeah fictions"—early-nineteenth-century texts that attempt to trace obeah's "seemingly supernatural effects back to natural and ordinary causes"—it was not that enslaved esoteric healers and harmers could *do* anything; it was that enslaved Africans

[45] My reference is the second edition, published in London in 1800.

would *believe* anything.[46] The work of such an explanation is twofold: it exempts Euro-Americans from the possibility of supernatural harm, and it casts African *belief* as the problem to be managed.

We see these principals at work in the Charleston conspiracy trial, as well. Like Moseley, the magistrates attribute Jack's power to a particularly African credulity. The brief biography of Jack furnished in the *Account* and *Report* tells us he was "born a conjurer and a physician, in his own country, (for in Angola they are matters of inheritance)." He then "practised *these arts* in this country for fifteen years, without its being generally known among the whites," meanwhile cultivating an "influence among the Africans [that] was inconceivable" (*A* 24, emphasis in original; *OR* 24). In most instances Jack's influence is limited to his "countrymen," which sometimes means his "Gullah" countrymen, with whom it is suggested he is in a society (*OR* 106, 116), but usually refers to the fact that he was born in Africa rather than into slavery in the U.S. or Caribbean. With a federal ban on the importation of slaves beginning fourteen years prior to the conspiracy trials, it was already the case that the number of African-born slaves in the U.S. was shrinking. Lois A. Walker and Susan R. Silverman speculate that Gullah Jack likely arrived in Charleston in 1806, about a year and a half before such trafficking would be outlawed, meaning he would have belonged to one of the last waves of U.S. slaves born in Africa, outside of slavery.[47] This must at least in part motivate Hamilton's conjecture that "the treacherous and vindictive artifices of war in his own country, existed in unimpaired vigour in his memory"; his *Account* concludes, "his wildness and

[46] "Obeah's Sensations," p. 722.
[47] Walker and Silverman, pp. 7-8.

vehemence of gesture and the malignant glance with which he eyed the witnesses who appeared against him, all indicated the savage, who indeed had been *caught* but not *tamed*" (25, emphasis in original). This emphasis on Gullah Jack's Africanness is employed to project his power outside the limits of the U.S. (it only works on his own "credulous" and "clannish" countrymen) and backward in time (such a figure cannot be reproduced),[48] thus rendering him anachronistic, obsolete.

One strange formulation is worth dwelling on: the *Account* acknowledges that "even those negroes who were born in this country seem to have spoken of his charmed invincibility with a confidence which looked much like belief" (*A* 25). While drawing a distinguishing line between "believing" Africans and African-Americans who merely speak "confidently," the suggestion here is that Hamilton himself is less than confident that Jack's influence is headed toward obsolescence as the slave trade in the South transitions to a domestic economy. The possibility that insurrectionary African conjure could somehow animate even American-born slaves demanded a more forceful obliteration of such practices.

Perhaps this anxiety motivated the turn in the trial documents to charges of theatricality as a further method of disabling Jack's threat. Hamilton suggests that Jack's motive for joining the conspiracy was that it "afforded him the most ample opportunities of displaying his peculiar art" (24)—a display so excessive that Hamilton claims "it would be both tedious and disgusting to relate the many artifices employed by this miscreant to deceive and cajole his deluded countrymen" (25). These artifices evidently make their way into the courtroom, as

[48] Testimony in the *Report* mentions that Gullah Jack had taught another slave, Tom Russell, to be a doctor, and that the two were partners in conjuring—however, it is suggested that Tom is also Gullah (that is, also not an American-born slave), and beyond this testimony Tom is nowhere else mentioned to be a conjurer (107, 112).

well, and are used to explain why certain witnesses feel "bound up" or are too afraid to testify against the conjurer[49]: "No description can accurately convey to others the impression which his trial, defence, and appearance made on those who witnessed the workings of his cunning and rude address" (24). The *Report* follows and embellishes the *Account*'s charges of Jack's theatricality, offering further detail about the trial itself:

> When arrested and brought before the Court … he assumed so much ignorance, and looked and acted the fool so well, that some of the Court could not believe that this was the Necromancer who was sought after. This conduct he continued when on his trial, until he saw the witnesses and heard the testimony as it progressed against him; when in an instant, his countenance was lighted up as if by lightning, and 'his wildness and vehemence of gesture, and the malignant glance with which he eyed the witnesses who appeared against him, all indicated the savage, who indeed had been caught but not tamed.' (*OR* 47)

The *Report* appropriates Hamilton's line—"caught but not tamed"—to describe the mode by which he threatens and deludes his peers. But while, for Hamilton, this "wildness and vehemence" indicate his foreignness, Kennedy and Parker seem to take this a step further,

[49] For example, during Jack's trial, a witness confesses a deep fear in Jack's "*conjurations*": "I must beg the Court to send me away from this place, *as I consider my life in great danger from having given testimony.* I have heard it said all about the streets … that whoever is the white man's friend, God help them; from which I understood they would be killed—I was afraid of Gullah Jack as a conjurer" (105, Kennedy and Parker's emphasis). Just after this passage, Kennedy and Parker note that, after Jack is sentenced to death, a witness comes forward to make the following confession: "Until Jack was taken up and condemned to death, I felt as if I was bound up, and had not the power to speak one word about it—Jack charmed Julius and myself at last, and we then consented to join" (107).

suggesting this, too, is artifice. Instead, in the *Report*, the deepest, most "earnest" layer of Gullah Jack is revealed after these testimonies prove his guilt:

> His courage, however, soon forsook him. When he received his sentence of death, he earnestly implored that a fortnight longer might be allowed him, and then that a week longer, which he continued earnestly to solicit until he was taken from the Court Room to his cell. (*OR* 47)

The *Report* then quotes from the *Account*, which ends its section on Gullah Jack thusly: "When Jack was dragged forth to the scaffold, he seemed conscious that his arts would stand him in little stead, and gave up his spirit without firmness or composure" (25). Together, the two official narratives strive to develop an image of a man who is either as deluded about his powers as his followers or one step above them—in either case, his power is nothing for a white Charlestonians to be concerned about.

Spiritual Terror

But to return now to the argument posed at the beginning of the chapter, if Charleston authorities were so sure that Jack's threat was entirely under control, as they appear so keen to express across the official narratives, then why would Jack need to be put to death? Although describing a markedly different set of behaviors, Vincent Brown's concept of "spiritual terror" supplies a useful way to understand both the court's decision to kill Jack and their hyper-focus on his status as an "invincible" conjurer in the documents later dispersed. Brown's masterful essay, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society," describes the use of "spectacular punishments committed upon the bodies of the dead" as a method of "terrorizing

the spiritual imaginations of the enslaved" (24). Captured rebellious slaves were subjected to utterly brutal tortures, their bodies continually mutilated even after death, in order to impress upon the enslaved the governing authority's power over both life and the afterlife (25-8). Notably, Brown cites a report to the House of Commons describing the torture and execution of obeah men in the wake of Tacky's Rebellion in 1760:

> At the place of execution he bid defiance to the Executioner, telling him that it was not in the Power of the White People to kill him; and the Negro spectators were astonished when they saw him expire. On the other Obeah-men, various Experiments were made with Electrical Machines and Magic Lanthorns, which produced very little Effect; except on one who, after receiving many severe Shocks, acknowledged his Master's Obeah exceeded his own. (qtd. on 38)

The passage reveals that the objective of such hideous displays was not to affirm the court's judicial authority, but what Brown calls its "spiritual power" (34).

We don't see such torture or mutilation in the case of Gullah Jack and the other executed conspirators; by all accounts their executions were the routine hangings that the slavocracy inflicted upon troublesome slaves. Curiously, one account tells us that Hamilton approached Jack on the scaffold and "besought him, long and earnestly to make a full confession, reminding him of his offended God." Jack allegedly insisted upon his innocence, but after some time, "Hamilton again approached the gallows, and again urged a confession," to no avail.[50] There is no evidence that any of the other men were approached in this way, suggesting that Hamilton was particularly interested in provoking Jack to finally declare to

[50] Quoted in Egerton and Paquette, p. 734.

white authority the words that had been attributed to him—that he could not be subject to white harm—in the moments just before the state exercised its biopolitical power over him. Such an utterance would prove the state's power "exceeded his own."[51] While they did not write this authority into Jack's flesh in the way the eighteenth-century Jamaican authorities Brown describes did, they wrote it into the narratives they afterwards dispersed—narratives that risk sacrificing judicial authority by highlighting Jack's "charmed invincibility" in order to recuperate that loss in the display of another form of power: the ability to kill a man who couldn't be killed.

On July 9th, 1822, the court pronounced Gullah Jack guilty. Magistrate Lionel Kennedy read him his sentence:

> The Court after deliberately considering all the circumstances of your case, are perfectly satisfied of your guilt. In the prosecution of your wicked designs, you were not satisfied with resorting to natural and ordinary means, but endeavoured to enlist on your behalf, all the powers of darkness, and employed for the purpose, the most disgusting mummery and superstition. You represented yourself as invulnerable; that you could neither be taken nor destroyed, and that all who fought under your banners would be invincible. While such wretched expedients are calculated to *inspire* the confidence, or

[51] There's evidence of this kind of claim in the North American setting, as well. Mechal Sobel recounts folktales in which "whites sometimes [have] the 'bigger' magic" (43), and Frederick Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom* provocatively suggests that the white overseer Edward Covey attacks him (despite his carrying a protective root) because his "tormentor had gone deeper into the black art than myself, (as was sometimes said of him)" (176). Somewhat similarly, a Dr. Cartwright writing on the topic of drapetomania ("the disease causing the negroes to run away") claims that treating slaves well will "spell-bind" them so they "cannot run away" in "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *DeBow's Review* [New Orleans], vol. 11, 1851, pp. 331-32. In the American context, too, racialized power differentials came to be understood in non-secular terms.

> to alarm the fears of the ignorant and credulous, they excite no other emotion in the mind of the intelligent and enlightened, but contempt and disgust. Your boasted charms have not preserved yourself, and of course could not protect others. "Your altars and your gods have sunk together in the dust." The airy spectres, conjured by you, have been chased away by the special light of truth, and you stand exposed, the miserable and deluded victim of offended justice. Your days are literally numbered. You will shortly be consigned to the cold and silent grave, and all the powers of darkness cannot rescue you from your approaching fate! Let me then, conjure you to devote the remnant of your miserable existence, in fleeing from the "*wrath to come.*" This can only be done by a full disclosure of the truth. The court are willing to afford you all the aid in their power, and to permit any minister of the gospel, whom you may select to have free access to you. To him you may unburden your guilty conscience. Neglect not the opportunity, for there is "no device nor art beyond the tomb," to which you must shortly be consigned. (*A* 50, emphasis in original)

For a number of reasons, the sentence is an astounding one.[52] As I've already argued, Jack's crime seems ultimately to be "endeavor[ing] to enlist…the powers of darkness," but the sentence wants both to claim that this entreaty was (pathetically) sincere *and* that it required the calculated manipulation of superstition—an ambiguity that little calls to be resolved given that Jack is to be put to hung either way. Jack's death silences the question of his conjuring

[52] Notably, the only court sentence provided in Hamilton's *Account* is Jack's, and though Hamilton adds a footnote—"The above is selected out of the many Sentences passed on this occasion, with a view to give the reader a general idea of them"—the specificity and extremity of the sentence suggests a particular purpose (which the footnote intends to mute) (50).

power while also explicitly disproving his "invincibility." Disturbingly, the courts perform this maneuver while appropriating a line from a well-known and oft-quoted anti-slavery speech delivered by John Philpot Curran in 1794 arguing on behalf of James Somerset,[53] a slave petitioning for freedom on British soil: "No matter with what solemnities he may have been devoted on the altar of slavery, the moment he touches the sacred soil of Britain, *the altar and the god sink together in the dust*."[54] The sentence thus makes a larger claim about the absolute authority of the "gods and altars" of slavery over those, real or pretended, of any conjurer, prefiguring the decision of *North Carolina vs. Mann* that "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect."

While Hyde argues that the court in this sentence "adopt[s] realism as its weapon ('the special light of truth')" (49), I argue instead that this appropriation, however mocking, points to the deep anxiety about conjure's power that lies behind the court's decision to eliminate this would-be magical rebel, and a desire to confront him with all the power they could muster—secular or not. There is "no device nor art beyond the tomb," they remind him, loosely quoting Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." [55] To borrow a phrase from Jared Hickman, the magistrates sought to narrate themselves as "gods in and of this world," capable of consigning Jack and his art to the obliteration of the grave. In a trial concerned with "what *might* have been" (A 10)—a concern

[53] The same speech quoted in *The Black Vampyre*, as discussed in the Introduction. The speech was very widely circulated.
[54] My emphasis. For a full copy of the speech, see pp. 153-82 of *The Speeches of the Right Honourable John Philpot Curran.*
[55] Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1997, p. 758.

about the range of futures white Charlestonians might have to face given the South's renewed commitments to the regime of racial slavery—the trial documents seek to unfurl the divine "might" of the slaveholder's rule.

Chapter Two

"Wild old warrior prophet":
Mesmerizing Revolt in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Dred

By midcentury, in a different setting and among different players than those represented in the Charleston courtroom, the question of whether occultism could prove politically radical began to be formulated among Northern whites. In the decades after Jack's trial, the occult arts had found practitioners and theorists among America's white middle-class in the form of European-imported mesmerism and homegrown spiritualism. In his introduction to *The Spirit-Rapper*, an 1854 semi-autobiographical novel of a brief journey through mesmeric occultism on the way to Catholic conversion, Orestes Brownson writes, "The connection of spirit-rapping, or the spirit-manifestations, with modern philanthropy, visionary reforms, socialism, and revolutionism, is not an imagination of my own. It is historical, and asserted by the [Spiritualists] themselves."[1] This particular conjunction of progressive U.S. politics and the occult—here meaning contact with an invisible world alternately deemed "magnetic" or "spiritual"—has been under scrutiny since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. While spiritualist newspapers and séances took up the causes of abolition, women's rights, free love, and protection of native lands, writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and, later, Henry James expressed mocking criticism of a politics so ungrounded as to believe in any accessible otherworldly contact. The question of whether the various enchanted states of the nineteenth century were politically radical, embarrassing, or simply irrelevant has been an ongoing one. In

[1] Orestes Brownson, *The Spirit-Rapper*, p. vi.

the twentieth century, until Ann Braude's 1989 *Radical Spirits,* the accord between progressive movements and unconventional belief systems received little substantial examination, in part because it was thought, as Braude explains in her introduction to the second edition, that such a project would "tar women's rights with the taint of" occultism.[2] Work by historians like Braude, Alex Owen, and Molly McGarry has made it clear that the ideas and methods of the spiritualist movement did not "taint" an otherwise liberal-secular culture of gender reform but were, in fact, crucial to imagining different forms of sociality and opening new channels of political possibility, particularly with regards to emergent feminist movements of England and the U.S.[3]

Recently, scholars of American literature have deepened the question of how the popular occult practices of the mid- and late-nineteenth century were imbricated with political reform movements in clarifying and critical directions. Dorri Beam and Christina Zwarg have examined in more detail precisely what political work the associative linguistic style and the therapeutic pretensions of mesmerism are poised to do in women's spiritualist writing and in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, respectively.[4] Whether as a new way of figuring gender or as a method of easing white anxiety about the horizon of abolition, Beam and Zwarg see nineteenth-century writers engaging with mesmerism as a method of escaping entrenched modes of thought that stand in the way of a more liberatory politics.

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[2] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, p. xvi.

[3] Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England*; McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*.

[4] Beam, *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*; Zwarg, "Who's Afraid of Virginia's Nat Turner?: Mesmerism, Stowe, and the Terror of Things."

On the other hand, Russ Castronovo has argued that the nineteenth century's "occult practices popularized mystical experiences of citizenship that pretend to have no debts to material circumstances of privilege or empowerment."[5] Castronovo sees the popular obsession with mediumship, clairvoyance, spiritual unity, and other forms of unconscious disembodiment as the public sphere's repression of a sociopolitical awareness capable of attending to material difference, particularly with regards to race. By his lights, mesmerism and spiritualism amount to "liberal democratic obsessions" that facilitate the abstraction of political issues into mere "matters of psychic distress" and thus are antithetical to what he sees as the real labor of radical democracy.[6] Emily Ogden's work has also begun to push against the givenness of enchantment's radicalism, though on precisely the opposite terms of Castronovo's argument. By tracing the path mesmerism took through the Caribbean before reaching the U.S., Ogden unearths mesmerism's side gig as a managerial tactic "by which properly secular moderns could extract labor from those who were not modern yet."[7] Even while it may have etherealized political strife to the psychospiritual realm, mesmerism offered a way to fetch higher prices for magnetically enriched slaves in places like Guadalupe and Martinique[8] or a way to ensure U.S. workers' sleep schedules matched the tolling of the factory bell and their minds and bodies could handle the various tasks assigned to them on the factory floor. Ogden reminds us that Charles Poyen, the magnetizer who brought mesmerism to the U.S., found as his first magnetic subject a weaver named Cynthia Gleason who suffered from an insomnia

[5] Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, p. 107.
[6] Ibid., pp. 102, 137-42.
[7] Emily Ogden, "Beyond Radical Enchantment: Mesmerizing Laborers in the Americas," p. 818.
[8] See also Kieran Murphy's "Magic and Mesmerism in Saint-Domingue," p. 40.

that compromised her work performance. Attending to this other strand of mesmerism's appeal illustrates, in Ogden's words, that "one problem with the story of radical enchantment is that it does not leave us in a very good position to remember how instrumental use and utopian striving can be two sides of the same coin."[9]

As these recent projects have made clear, the question is no longer whether enchantment is radical, as if either committing to a narrative of broad secularization or making too much of a period's stubborn occultism is the politically retrograde stance. A finer-tuned consideration of precisely what uses discourses of enchantment were put to in a period of what we might call partial sublimation (rather than unfinished demystification) of mainstream magical belief is required. Although it may read as a form of enchantment, the mostly white New England reformers who put the alternative medicine to occult use also sought to re-read with a sense of mastery the supernaturalisms of foreign times, places, and cultures.[10] While the "fluid" of animal magnetism was only "discovered" by Mesmer in the eighteenth century, its supposed universality meant that it could be used to explain any stubbornly indiscernible behaviors and effects across time and space. Later in *The Spirit-Rapper*, for example, Brownson's narrator quotes a friend of his, Mr. Winslow, who expresses a common sentiment among Mesmer's U.S. followers: "Miracles, divinations, sorceries, magic, the black arts, which surprise us all in history, sacred and profane…I think I have in mesmerism an explanation of them

[9] Ogden, "Beyond Radical Enchantment," p. 841.

[10] Ogden's *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* is immensely clarifying on this point. "Modern enchantment," she argues, "is the negotiation between those who were aiming at modernity and those whom they see as nonmodern" (18). She points to instances—such as the introduction of mesmerism into New England factories to help attune the bodies of factory workers to the hours of the workday—where the relation between modern and nonmodern agents is not one of disenchantment but one of "administering" certain susceptible bodies.

all."[11] After a brief description of mesmerism's journey to the U.S. and overview of the dominant strand of mesmeric literature, this chapter will turn to mesmerism's metadiscursive pretensions and the way they show up in another set of mesmeric texts—primarily Stowe's novel of simmering slave insurrection, *Dred*. In doing so, I hope to keep in mind my own version of Ogden's caution—that the enchantment of one class of people can mean the erasure of another.

From Universal Cure to Philosophy of Superstition

By the time mesmerism made its way to the U.S. with the arrival of French mesmerist Charles Poyen in 1836, it had much to offer. When Franz Anton Mesmer first put forward the principles of his "magnetic cure" in 1775, it was with the promise that his treatment methods would "immediately cure illness of the nerves and mediately all others."[12] The cure was comprehensive, he claimed, because it acted upon an all-pervasive fluid whose chance accumulations or disturbances were to blame for most human maladies. One need only be skilled in manipulating this "animal magnetism," inducing "crises" in the patient until the fluid regained its proper balance, to be an adequate healer. Thus mesmerism offered a universal law of mutual influence—albeit one that was unevenly adopted by its adherents—that could account for effects in bodies both human and celestial at the same time as it made

[11] Brownson, *The Spirit-Rapper*, p. 51.
[12] Qtd. in Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, p. 5.

available the profession of "magnetizer" to any paid subscriber of Mesmer's Société de l'Harmonie, which had branches across France.[13]

Decades before Poyen's inaugural U.S. lectures, two investigations commissioned by the French government had evaluated and dismissed Mesmer's practices, but this dismissal did little to quell the spread of mesmerism in Europe and beyond. This was in part because the investigation was concerned more with the question of whether any such magnetic fluid existed than with mesmerism's perceivable therapeutic effects.[14] The success rate of the mesmeric cure continued to attract disciples, among them the magnetizer who would discover in mesmerism the unexpected effect for which it is now most known and likely due to which mesmerism found keen reception in the U.S. It was Amand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur who discovered in 1784 that the passing of the hands required in the mesmeric cure had induced a peculiar somnambulic state in one of his patients, Victor Race, a Puységur family servant. Puységur noted that Race "spoke aloud, answered questions, and displayed a far brighter mind than in his normal condition." Furthermore, Race's observations exhibited clairvoyance; he was able both to diagnose his own ailments and predict their developments.[15] The discovery of this remarkable effect launched magnetism from the world of popular medicine into the arena of mainstream entertainment, a move that endowed mesmerism with a supernatural valence and thus exposed it to critique on religious and political grounds on top of its rejection by established medicine. But these critiques failed to

[13] See Henri F. Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, pp. 64-5.
[14] Fuller, *Mesmerism*, pp. 7-9; Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, pp. 65-6.
[15] Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, pp. 71.

dampen its popularity; as David Walker has shown with regards to the spiritualist séances that followed in later decades, a "critical apparatus" was often built into clairvoyant displays and their advertisements, making negotiation with skepticism part and parcel of mesmerism's widespread public appeal.[16]

When Poyen began to lecture on and demonstrate the efficacy of animal magnetism across New England in the late 1830s, mesmerism was thus a source of popular entertainment and provocative public discourse as much as it was a method of restoration and healing. One could witness the wonders wrought by a somnambulic state induced on a public stage; read the various exposés and defenses published in local papers after each performance; visit one of the private practicing magnetizers who had been instructed "gratuitously" by Poyen, himself;[17] or learn how to magnetize at home with the help of a new English translation of French magnetizer J.P.F. Deleuze's *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*—each of these activities was bound up with all the others. It was as this gestalt that mesmerism made its entrance into American literature with stories and novels depicting the controversial and complex relationship between magnetizer and patient or medium. Fictional depictions of private encounters between a doctor and an afflicted patient are often tinged with the supernatural, like Poe's "Mesmeric Revelations" or "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," while scenes of public and private experimentation with mediumship are from the very beginning inflected by political and social concerns about domination and sexual propriety, as the magnetizer is often a morally suspect adult man and the medium almost always a virginal young woman who has

[16] David Walker, "The Humbug in American Religion: Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," p. 30.
[17] Charles Poyen, *Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England*, p. 46.

been rendered his "slave"—Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance* typify this anxiety.

For the most part, the type of mesmeric fiction that has been the primary focus of criticism has determined the way mesmeric enchantment gets read in the twenty-first century. Certainly, the gender politics of popular mesmerism was of especial interest to nineteenth-century authors who took it up in fiction, and much recent criticism of mesmeric literature has considered the politics of this aestheticization of the induced trance state. In Morgan Fritz's work on the novel of the female orator, for example, she observes that in literature which depicts trance states adjacent to reform movements, "a mesmeric force either mockingly marks the absence of a more constructive bond or offers the hope of a deep-seated connection that metaphorizes the potential of a widespread women's movement."[18] The trance scene, in her view, offers a key to understanding the false or incipient sociality projected by novels like *The Blithedale Romance* or James' later *Bostonians*. Similarly, Dorri Beam finds that "the feminist appropriation of mesmerist notions of spirit allowed these writers to develop stylistic floridity into a synecdoche for an alternative form of embodiment with striking consequences for social relations." Following Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Beam argues that the trance scene, or "mesmeric vision," provides women writers the condition for an experimental linguistic style that "asks us to take language seriously as a location of social experiment."[19] Just as animal magnetism was so named because its properties "evince[d] an *analogy* with a

[18] Morgan Fritz, "'The Mesmeric Power': Sarah Grand and the Novel of the Female Orator," p. 456.
[19] Beam, *Style, Gender, and Fantasy*, pp. 83, 127.

magnet,"[20] this criticism takes for granted that magnetizing is not itself a political act but can instead help decode or occasion a book's other political projects—in the case of *The Blithedale Romance*, the community farm, and in the case of the writing Beam studies, a poetics of alternative embodiment.

The general treatment of mesmerism as analogical rather than material to a book's politics is in part, I think, due to this focus on the familiar, often gendered dynamic of magnetizer and medium, which represents only one manifestation of the mesmeric principle—and the one most subject to debunking. Before the end of the nineteenth century, mesmeric or spiritualist stagings of entrancement had fallen out of fashion, as had the art and medicine called "mesmerism," as the explicitly non-supernatural discourse of "hypnotism" came to be the dominant descriptive term for entranced states. While a focus on scenes of staged mesmerism no doubt has been generative in terms of understanding alternative and indirect ways that gender politics were being worked out in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, it has tended to miss or treat as peripheral other literature in which the language if not the typical procedure of mesmerism appears—where the mesmeric principle may be said to be at work distinct from any intentional application. That is, what changes when we look to texts that take advantage of mesmerism as a "Philosophy of Superstition," as Scottish advocate John Colquhuon terms it in his 1836 *Isis Revelata*, that offers a key to rereading events thought to be caused by "the effects of supernatural agency"?[21] If such events are of a large enough scale, mesmerism offers not just a way of reading historical accounts of magic, but history itself—and

[20] From Mesmer's *Reflections on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism*, qtd. and trans. in Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 5 (my emphasis).
[21] John Colquhuon, *Isis Revelata: An Inquiry into the Origin, Progress, and Present State of Animal Magnetism*, p. 184.

further, of imagining political interventions in the present. Mesmer apparently claimed, for example, that mesmerism was responsible for the "agitation" that led to independence in Haiti.[22] This particular application for mesmeric theory, not necessarily intended for a Christian millenarian agenda, could not help but be appealing to Stowe as she experimented with a more radical vision of social change in her second abolitionist novel. If we look to this subsidiary offer that mesmerists and their texts made, an altogether different literary mesmerism becomes discernible, one in which mesmerism is not analogical to a work's politics but is intimately involved in the project of slave revolt.

Stowe and "a Real Spiritual Spiritualism"

In a July 15th, 1844, letter to her husband Calvin, Stowe describes a recent journey to the "spirit land." She and her brother Henry, likely following instructions provided by the recently published *History and Philosophy of Animal Magnetism, with Practical Instructions for the Exercise of this Power*,[23] had only to "[sit] opposite each other with [their] eyes fixed and [their] thumbs in contact" to provoke a "semi-somnolent state" in Harriet, in which her hands rose and moved of their own accord and her "mind & powers of association seemed enormously bright &

[22] Recounted in Ellenberger, p. 73. I must admit that, despite extended efforts, I have been unable to locate Ellenberger's source material. He does not cite the claim, and all other sources that make mention of Mesmer's boast point back to Ellenberger. I do not doubt that Mesmer, who also claimed to have magnetized the sun and therefore all running water, would say such a thing (Ellenberger, 69 [this claim *is* cited]). However, it would be exceedingly valuable to explore the context in which the claim was made. I doubt, that is, that Mesmer was sympathetic to the revolutionaries. If anyone is able to track down the original source, please let me know.

[23] A description of a practice almost identical to what Stowe and her brother perform appears on page 11 of the pamphlet.

active." "Show this to Edward," she concludes the letter, and "see if he does not think there is an animal magnetic fluid."[24]

Although many accounts of Stowe's engagement with the phenomena of mesmerism and spiritualism focus on her visits with spiritualists after the death of her son Henry in 1857, Stowe and her siblings, like many other Northern middle-class households in the U.S., had been experimenting with popular occultism as early as this 1844 session with Henry. While she never become as devout a practitioner as some of her siblings—Isabella Beecher Hooker considered herself a prophet and claimed to have been visited by over 400 spirits—Stowe remained sufficiently curious about the possibility of otherworldly transmissions and present-day miracles to produce a series of articles on "Spiritualism" nearly three decades later for the *Christian Union*.[25] Her conclusions are somewhat ambivalent; if indeed the spiritual world can be accessed, such contact won't be as banal as the table raps or guitar strums that a medium once attributed to her son's visiting spirit. It will rather be "the true supernaturalism of the primitive ages"—what in a letter to Calvin she describes as "a real spiritual spiritualism which has fallen into disuse, and must be revived" by those with a spiritually receptive "constitutional

[24] The full text of the letter: "The first session he succeeded in almost throwing me into convulsions, spasms & shocks of heat & prickly sensation ran all over me. My lungs were violently constricted & my head in dreadful commotion & I was so frightened that I called out for quarter. This strange tempestuous effect was occasioned simply by our sitting opposite each other with our eyes fixed and our thumbs in contact for about thirty minutes. … [Another] time after a long similar conflict I passed into a semi-somnolent state and quite to my surprise found my hands without any will of mine rising up and moving in various ways. I watched their motions with very curious sensations, for amid all the bodily effects my mind & powers of observation seemed enormously bright & active. … Thus you see I have come to the very spirit land. … It was wholly unexpected to me that I could be subjected to this power, no one else who ever tried has produced the first particle of effect & indeed my nervous system seemed to offer gallant resistance. Show this account to Edward & see if he does not think there is an animal magnetic fluid."

[25] On Isabella's spiritualist activities, see pp. 581-92 of Milton Rugoff's *The Beechers*. William Beecher also acted for a time as a magnetic healer (416-7).

formation," like that of the "apostles, prophets, and workers of miracles" of the past.[26] For Stowe, no "doubtful juggle by pale moonlight" reaches this dignity.[27]

Stowe's writings and private experimentations reveal her clear interest in the possibility that mesmerism and spiritualism had something to offer. They promised real contact with the "spirit land": exciting as a present-day prospect as well as a way of making sense of certain mysteries of the Biblical past—or, to quote her brother Charles,"giv[ing] to the Bible its natural meaning." [28] As a persuasive technique—a way to achieve nondiscursive influence over another's body and mind—such occult arts also held their appeal for Stowe, though she was certainly wary of how such a power might be abused. Many have read Stowe's remarks on false spiritualism in light of her disdain for popular spiritualists like Victoria Woodhull, who Stowe saw as cashing in on a public "craving" for something beyond the "intense materialism of the present age."[29] Stowe's 1861 novel *My Wife and I* lampoons a figure not unlike Woodhull; the free love and women's suffrage activist Audacia Dangyereyes coerces men to buy her *Universal Empyreal Harmoniad*, "every word" of which was "dictated by spirits while she was in the trance state" (436), and her followers excuse her rampant "profanity" as a "state of prophetic exaltation which naturally seeks vent in intensified language" (268). But what differentiates Stowe's critique of crude, career-minded occultism in *My Wife and I* from, say, that found in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* or James' *The Bostonians*, is Stowe's unambiguous investment

[26] *Christian Union*, vol. 2, issue 10, pp. 145-6; letter to Calvin reprinted in Charles Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Story of Her Life*, pp. 180-1.
[27] Charles Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, p. 285.
[28] Quoted in Allen Putnam's *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Witchcraft, and Miracle*, p. 58.
[29] *Christian Union*, vol., issue 9, pp. 129-30; Charles Stowe, pp. 180-1. See also Amy Easton-Flake's "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Multifaceted Response to the Nineteenth-Century Woman Question."

in such states in other political and geographical contexts—notably in her antislavery novel, *Dred*. There, the fugitive rebel Dred's "state of exaltation and trance" affords his faculties "a preternatural keenness and intensity" and puts him in touch with divinity (353).

What marks the difference between Audacia's trance states and Dred's?[30] The more obvious question might be why ought they be read together, at all—the differences between the two characters—not to mention the novels—are, certainly, impossible to miss. Audacia is a young, white, overbearing and self-interested activist in the North, while Dred is a fugitive slave fomenting rebellion from within North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp and taking inspiration from the Bible. But considered in light of Stowe's classification of spiritualist pretensions, Audacia comes to look like the juggler by moonlight and Dred the "real spiritual spiritualist"—indeed the novel classifies him among the "wild old warrior prophets of the heroic ages" (261).[31] In the rest of this chapter, I'll to attempt to trace the convoluted route by which Dred, Nat Turner rewrit mesmeric, could come to supply at an answer to Stowe's dissatisfaction with the prevailing spiritualism of the midcentury onward. Seeking to harness an occult power she clearly believed in but knew was subject to exploitation, Stowe found in mesmerism's accounts of "primitive" magic a way to craft an insurrectionary body capable of supernatural feats but underwritten by a higher will.

"Wild Old Warrior Prophet"

[30] While it may be argued that Audacia's trance states are faked, she does achieve a real degree of influence over other's via "coaxing" eye contact and touching the narrator Henry's hands, causing him to "obey" her "mechanically" (240-3).

[31] *Christian Union*, vol. 2, issue 10, p. 146.

In 1856, four years after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dred* appeared—an "African American-inspired revision," as Robert S. Levine has argued, of her first antislavery novel.[32] Most critics have pointed out that, while *Dred* with its comparatively more radical content—it comes close to depicting a slave uprising—made quite a splash when it was first published, the novel's hasty composition and disjointed plot consigned it out of public and critical memory until somewhat recently. Indeed, one can imagine why a novel published shortly before the Civil War and addressed to its historical present, as Stowe's preface announces, and which depicts a disappointingly stunted fugitive slave rebellion and a marriage plot cut short by cholera, might have trouble finding a life beyond its moment. Much recent criticism of the novel either circles around the question of its difference from its sentimental predecessor, sometimes with an eye toward redeeming Stowe's abolitionist politics from the infamous legacy of her more enduring sentimental novel, or the question of why Stowe ultimately shies away from depicting the violent slave rebellion towards which *Dred*'s plot builds. My own interest in the novel has less to do with how it tries to rectify the mistakes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or how to interpret its final pages—though I think those are worthwhile pursuits. Rather, I am drawn to *Dred* because in its eponymous figure, the fugitive slave fomenting resistance from the sheltered space of the Great Dismal Swamp, I see Stowe grappling with the possibility of supernaturally augmented insurrection.

The strange character of Dred has of course been parsed from a number of angles, many of which emphasize his biblical precedents—something the text encourages: the Bible is "the nurse and forming power of his soul… Dred, indeed, resembled in organization and tone

[32] *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, p. 146.

of mind some of those men of old who were dwellers in the wilderness, and drew their inspirations from the desert" (557). Judie Newman calls him "a Samson in physical strength, with a similar role as an outcast and would-be deliverer, leading his people from bondage into the wilderness, and dying before he can reach Canaan in Canada."[33] Samuel Otter describes him as more "a volatile mix of *Prophets* and *Revelation*" than a "'real' person." In the combination of Dred and Milly, a character modeled after Sojourner Truth, Kevin Pelletier sees a pairing that "exemplif[ies] the Biblical figure of Jesus, a being who is both loving and vengeful, capable of mercy and prepared to mete out punishment." Others, like Jared Hickman and Newman, see in Dred a Byronic hero—especially, following Hickman, during Dred's turns as an "infidel provocateur," impatient at the Christian God's toleration of slavery's manifold injustices.[34] Those who emphasize Dred's black revolutionary sources single out Denmark Vesey, Dred's father in the novel; Nat Turner, whose purported confessions—many of which are excerpted and attributed to Dred—are printed in the novel's appendix; and, recently, Frederick Douglass's fictionalized Madison Washington, a similarly "mesmeric" leader.[35]

What remain to be drawn out fully are Dred's occult aspects, which lurk in the text's background but are often overshadowed by or absorbed into his extemporaneous apocalyptic sermonizing. Dred may be a "wild old warrior prophet" (261), but he is also the grandson of a "reputed African sorcerer" who "taught [Dred] the secret of snake-charming, and had possessed

[33] From her introduction to *Dred*, p. 22.
[34] Samuel Otter, "Stowe and Race," p. 34; Kevin D. Pelletier, "David Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Logic of Sentimental Terror," p. 263; Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, pp. 371-2.
[35] Zwarg has made this connection between Washington and Dred in "Who's Afraid of Virginia's Nat Turner?" p. 28. For the mention of mesmerism, see Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, p, 36.

his mind from childhood with expectations of prophetic and supernatural impulses" (353-4). This lineage and these talents render Dred, like Gullah Jack, a doctor "among his people" (614). We know Stowe read Kennedy and Parker's *Official Report* of the Charleston conspiracy trials as she quotes from it rather extensively as a means of introducing Dred, and thus she was at least familiar with the depiction of conjuring the magistrates offered.[36] As well, Lynn Wardley has shown that there is somewhat of an understanding of conjure and fetish objects underneath Stowe's "belief in the force of inspirited possessions" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her housekeeping manuals.

Another text, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, helps to clarify how Stowe arrived a racialized notion of African mysticism through mesmerism. Published in 1853, *The Key* is a "mosaic of facts" proving to those critics who called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a false depiction of Southern slavery that the novel is indeed "a collection and arrangement of real incidents, of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered." Though she admits providing such a key is "unartistic," the novel's purpose and reception have transcended art, and "as a reality it may be proper that it should be defended" (1). The book is intended as a compilation of firm evidence for the oppressive world of Southern slavery she had depicted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and contains countless historical antecedents for characters and events in the novel. It is thus quite remarkable that in the chapter of the *Key* that substantiates Tom's vivid vision of Jesus near the end of the novel, Stowe says the explanation lies in the

[36] It is telling that, though she offers the disclaimer that the *Report* from which she draws is "unduly prejudiced" with regards to Vesey, she chooses to import without comment the court's disparaging assessment of Gullah Jack as "artful, cruel, bloody… diabolical," and "not remarkable for the correctness of his deportment" (271).

"psychology" of "the negro race": "They are possessed of a nervous organisation peculiarly susceptible and impressible." Stowe adopts the authority of mesmerism to buttress this claim:

> Mesmerists have found that the negroes are singularly susceptible to all that class of influences which produce catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, and partial clairvoyant phenomena. The African race, in their own climate, are believers in spells, in "fetish and obi," in "the evil eye," and other singular influences, for which probably there is an origin in this peculiarity of constitution. The magicians in scriptural history were Africans; and the so-called magical arts are still practised in Egypt, and other parts of Africa, with a degree of skill and success which can only be accounted for by supposing peculiarities of nervous constitution quite different from those of the whites. (45-6)

Newman has written that Stowe's *Key* "might more properly be described as the key to *Dred*,"[37] and indeed, in Stowe's description of Dred's "visions and supernatural communications," we find an abridged and lightly edited version of the same paragraph on mesmerism quoted above. This theory of constitutional susceptibility to mystical phenomena has been identified, rightly, as a product of her "romantic racialism" by critics like Levine, Zwarg, and Jamie M. Bolker.[38] But it's worth noting that turning to mesmerism for an explanation of the efficacy of certain magical arts was not an idea original to Stowe. Published just two years before Stowe's *Key*, William Gregory's *Letters on Animal Magnetism*, for example, contains a very similar passage: "It would appear, that negroes … are both highly susceptible subjects, and very

[37] From her introduction to *Dred*, 15.

[38] See Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, p. 163; Zwarg, "Who's Afraid of Virginia's Nat Turner?" p. 26; Bolker, "Stowe's Birds: Jim Crows and the Nature of Resistance in Dred," p. 251.

powerful magnetisers. The obi of the West Indies and of Africa, depends for its influence on their susceptibility."[39] Many of the major mesmerist texts distributed in the U.S. contain something along the lines of Gregory's observation, usually offered as proof of the universality of Mesmer's discovery.[40]

By ascribing Tom's and later Dred's supernaturally visions and abilities to mesmerism, Stowe is making use of an existing discourse that promised a new way of reading and making sense of certain unsolved mysteries of the past and present. In her reading of *Dred*, Justine S. Murison describes this work as "subsuming" African occult practices "into a language of the nervous system," in such a way that "does not necessarily obliterate African religion under a Western medical interpretation," instead rendering it "more 'real'" by giving it a "fundamental, physiological basis."[41] I would counter, however, that Stowe's trade of "obi and fetish" for a supernaturally "nervous state of mind" does come at considerable cost. To redescribe an esoteric African practice such as conjure or obeah as instead mesmeric, as Stowe does, is not simply to legitimate that practice to a Western audience; it is to supplant a form of black supernatural belief with a white one. By attending to mesmerism's metadiscursive pretensions and the way they get taken up in texts—primarily *Dred*—I hope to show that writers like Stowe do not understand the redescription of African-derived esoteric practices into the language of mesmerism as a kind of "syncretism," as Levine parses it,[42] but rather a form of

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[39] Gregory, *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism,* p. 105.
[40] Similar claims can be found in Deleuze's *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism* (1837); Poyen's *Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England* (1837); a popular anonymously written pamphlet, *The History and Philosophy of Animal Magnetism*, (1843); Allen Putnam's *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Witchcraft, and Miracle* (1858); and, as has been previously mentioned, John Colquhuon's *Isis Revelata.*
[41] *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature,* p. 118.
[42] *Martin Delany*, p. 162.

improvement—a more enlightened supernaturalism. That is, had Dred grown up in Africa before the discovery of mesmerism, he would have been thought a sorcerer, but here in the nineteenth-century U.S., we can understand him to be a properly Christian prophet. Mesmerism offered to Stowe a theory of magical power that paradoxically both transcended cultural specificity with its all-pervasive fluid and yet could still be accumulated within certain racialized "constitutions." It was a theory she took up, I argue, because it allowed for easy translation of African mysticism into Christianized American prophecy—easy because, by the time it reached her, most of the work of translation had already been done.

"Rough Magnetizing"

Conclusions about the link between magnetism and race were likely drawn from accounts of life in the West Indies written in the years shortly after Mesmer's practice had been introduced to Saint-Domingue in 1784,[43] as well as rulings issued by colonial authorities like the *Conseil Supérior du Cap.*[44] In many such accounts, rituals practiced among slaves are described using the language of magnetism. Take, for example, the following passage from Benjamin Moseley's 1799 *A Treatise on Sugar.* After explaining that Obi-men and Obi-women in Jamaica are widely recognized to be both bewitchers and magical healers, he writes,

> These magicians will interrogate the patient, as to the part of the body most afflicted. This part they will torture with pinching, drawing with gourds, or calabashes, beating,

[43] See Nathan Gorelick's "Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti, and the Origin of Psychoanalysis."

[44] Médéric Louis Élie *Moreau de Saint-Méry's 1797 Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de la Partie Francaise de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* is perhaps the best-known example of such an account. Rulings on magnetism from the *Conseil Supérior du Cap* are quoted in François Regourd's "Mesmerism in Saint Domingue: Occult Knowledge and Vodou on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," p. 321.

> and pressing. When the patient is nearly exhausted with this *rough magnetizing*, Obi brings out an old rusty nail, or a piece of bone, or an ass's tooth, or the jawbone of a rat, or a fragment of a quart bottle, from the part; and the patient is well the next day.[45]

Despite the fact that this remedy does not appear to involve the redistribution of an invisible fluid and its procedure little resembles that of the mesmeric cure, which consists either of the doctor passing their hands over a patient with no physical contact or of the patient gripping an iron rod placed in a *baquet* filled with magnetized water, Moseley equates obeah ritual with European magnetism.

It difficult to discern just what this elision means. Does Moseley believe these obeah practitioners are mimicking mesmeric cures they've seen performed elsewhere? Or does he think these cures work because they unwittingly operate upon magnetic currents? Matters are complicated by the fact that, as Kieran Murphy has pointed out with regards to the early ethnographic writing of Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, this same rendering of a perceived ritual (in this case, Haitian Vodun) in terms of primitive magnetism occurs even when the writer does not himself believe in magnetism's efficacy. Although Moreau de Saint-Méry is an outspoken critic of mesmerism's spread in Saint-Domingue, he writes the following of a Vodun dance: "What is very true, and at the same time very remarkable, in Vaudoux ceremony is this species of magnetism *[cette espèce du magnétisme]* which brings the gatherers to dance until they've lost all feeling."[46] In Murphy's words, Moreau de Saint-Méry apparently

[45] Moseley, *A Treatise on Sugar with Miscellaneous Medical Observations*, 2nd ed., p. 192 (emphasis in original).
[46] Quoted in French in Murphy, "Magic and Mesmerism in Saint-Domingue," p. 38; my translation.

gives us "a superstition described in terms of another superstition" to account for "something that does in fact take place."[47]

One is tempted to guess that Moreau de Saint-Méry intends to demean those involved in the ceremony by suggesting they're merely mimicking the magnetism they'd seen performed; as François Regourd has written, "the use of words designating at that time a familiar and reassuring form of charlatanism was doubtless a way to publicly disqualify any kind of black occult knowledge."[48] But this does not seem to be a simple disqualification, as he describes it as "very true" and "very remarkable" that this ritual dance has produced unaccountable effects. It may be that Moreau de Saint-Méry simply relies on a word he knows will be familiar to his French readers despite his own disdain for the practice. In any case, what seems to be a simple elision is fact much more complicated than it seems. Even if we take these late eighteenth-century descriptions of African diasporic rituals in the West Indies as primitive, "rough," or "would-be"[49] magnetism as simply knee-jerk efforts to make sense in European terms of behaviors and relations that threatened and confused white spectators, they are certainly *not* attempts to make a case for the magnetism's universality. Yet, this was precisely the purpose to which such colonial analogies were put. Those hoping to ignite European and U.S. interest in mesmerism could point to such instances as evidence that this "new science" could demystify all behaviors and effects that seemed to defy rational order.

Literary Mesmeric Rebellion

[47] Murphy, "Magic and Mesmerism in Saint-Domingue," p. 41.
[48] Regourd, p. 324.
[49] See the *Conseil Supérior* ruling of 23 November 1786, quoted in Regourd, p. 321.

This background helps explain in part how Stowe arrived at a character like Dred, a foreboding figure whose strikingly "African" eye (here, perhaps, a marriage of blackface minstrelsy and mesmeric theory)[50] might "enlarge itself and roll with a glassy fullness, like that of a sleepwalker in a somnambulic dream" or "[swell] out in glassy fullness, with a fixed, somnambulic stare" before each of his prophetic pronouncements (261, 314, 348). And Dred is as entrancing to others through the "overpowering mesmeric force" of his "gloomy fervor" (563) as he is subject to such trances, himself. To paraphrase Gregory's *Letters*, Dred appears to be "both a highly susceptible subject and a very powerful magnetizer"—not a mesmeric practitioner, as there is no evidence he is familiar with any routinized practice, but rather an illustration of mesmeric force working organically through a body "perfected" by history and a biological notion of race.

Stowe wasn't the only writer making use of or acknowledging this connection between charismatic black leadership and magnetic constitution. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in an 1861 article for *The Atlantic* on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, describes Vesey's alleged co-conspirator Peter Poyas as purportedly having "a magnetism in his eyes, of which his confederates stood in great awe; if he once got his eye upon a man, there was no resisting it"—a description which is repeated verbatim in William Wells Brown's 1863 *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements.*[51] In the collection of antislavery writings *Autographs for Freedom*, which also features a poem and story by Stowe, the Rev. R. R. Raymond describes Frederick Douglass as a "magnetic" orator whose voice, "with its rich and varied

[50] Thanks to Nadia Nurhussein for this observation.
[51] Higginson, "Denmark Vesey," in *Black Rebellion: Five Slave Revolts*, p. 116; Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, p. 144.

modulation," does the "work of enchantment." "[M]any a rapt assembly" he continues, "can testify to the witchery of his eloquence."[52]

Two major antebellum novellas depicting slave rebellion also make reference to mesmeric discourse. Near the beginning of Herman Melville's 1855 novella "Benito Cereno," Captain Delano, who has just boarded a Spanish slave ship that appears to be in distress, tries to get the attention of the ship's captain, Don Benito. Unbeknownst to Delano, the ship's slaves have revolted and are holding the captain hostage, though they've commanded him to behave as usual. Noticing that the ship's crew is greatly diminished and the ship seems to be rather the worse for wear, Delano asks the captain for details on the "misfortunes" that have befallen them: "Would Don Benito favor him with the whole story? Don Benito faltered; then, *like some somnambulist suddenly interfered with*, vacantly stared at his visitor, and ended by looking down on the deck."[53] Here we see a familiar mesmeric dynamic, in which the ship's captain appears in thrall to Babo, his servant, who "keep[s] his eye fixed on his face." The scene also employs the trope of unsuccessful interference with a sleepwalker, near ubiquitous in fictional and nonfictional narratives of mesmeric trance. It is quite distinct, however, from the usual setting, in which we'd expect to find a male magnetizer using mesmeric tactics to take advantage of a young female medium (often figured as his "slave"). Certainly, Don Benito's somnabulism adroitly plays off standard mesmeric fiction by reversing its standard roles, but it is significant that there's no indication Babo is familiar with the practice of mesmerism and is deploying it here—Babo merely looks at him and Delano lapses into a disarming trance. The

[52] "Outline of a Man," pp. 155-6.
[53] Melville, p. 1533, my emphasis.

assumption is instead that there is something *about* Babo that works a particular influence over the captain—perhaps something that is meant to explain how Babo managed to take over the ship, or perhaps something that merely accompanies his wrested control. The moment is brief, but it makes handy use of a discourse of power that Melville has been authorized to use by mesmerism's own claim to describe any scenario where one holds inordinate power over another.

As mentioned earlier, Douglass's 1853 "The Heroic Slave" also makes explicit reference to mesmerism with regards to its fictionalized protagonist, Madison Washington, though perhaps more cannily. In the story, Washington has just successfully reassured a group of slaves that they may trust Mr. Listwell, a sympathetic white abolitionist from the North who recognized Washington within the slave-gang and approached concernedly. "At [Washington's] words … the unhappy company gave signs of satisfaction and hope. It seems that Madison, by that mesmeric power which is the invariable accompaniment of genius, had already won the confidence of the gang, and was a sort of general-in-chief among them."[54] Though his novella predates the literary instances just discussed, Douglass seems to be familiar enough with the mesmerists' attribution of magnetic influence to charismatic black leaders to thwart the racialization of such a trait by ascribing it instead to "genius"; he may have even been responding to Raymond's characterization of him in *Autographs for Freedom*, in which "The Heroic Slave" was published.[55] In any case, the story might be said to inaugurate a new sub-

[54] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave,* p. 36.

[55] Paschal Beverly Randolph's complaint, written a few years later in 1858, attests to the way spiritualists treated the talents of a black medium and public lecturer: "If then I said anything remarkable or good, above the average intelligence of men of my lineage, why, even then spiritualists refused me the credit, as a general thing, openly

genre of U.S. mesmeric fiction, one in which magnetism names an unplaceable quality that renders one a compelling or irresistible leader—crucially distinct from the duplicitous magnetizers of the Hawthorne variety (although Babo makes an interesting case)—of resistance against slavery.

Leaving Conjure Behind

Placing her rebellious leader in this mesmeric literary tradition put Stowe in a prime position to ward off suggestions of duplicity or undo coercion from multiple angles. First, as has already been mentioned, Dred is cast as the polar opposite of someone like Audacia Dangyereyes who would use such power for selfish gain. While Audacia seeks to strut "cheek by jowl with the angel Gabriel, promenading the streets of the new Jerusalem" (267), Dred is willing to serve as "the rod of [God's] wrath, to execute vengeance on his enemies" even though the Lord "hath not granted [him] the assurance" that he will be one elect, who "shall be kings and priests on the earth" (634-5).

Making her slave revolt leader mesmeric put Stowe in a position to ward off other suggestions of duplicity, as well, which becomes clear when Stowe mentions another insurrectionary leader of "inconceivable" influence: Gullah Jack. In her brief summary of each of the conspirators of the Denmark Vesey trial, she mentions that Jack was

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taunted me with my natural, ethnological condition, and insulted my soul by denying me common intelligence, but said, by way of salve to the bitter wound, 'You are so extraordinarily developed that the dear angels of the spheral heavens can use you when wide awake!'" Qtd. in John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*, p. 6.

> regarded as a sorcerer, and, as such, feared by the natives of Africa. He was not only considered invulnerable, but that he could make others so by his charms, and that he could, and certainly would, provide all his followers with arms. He was artful, cruel, bloody: his disposition, in short, was diabolical. (271)

Dred, like Gullah Jack, certainly holds a powerful influence over his followers. The first meeting we see between Dred and the novel's other black male protagonist, Harry—an enslaved man who might make Dred a good partner if he could be convinced to desert his white sister (and owner)—illustrates this plainly. After Harry is accosted on the road by his belligerent white brother, Tom, Dred emerges from the roadside swampland to greet him. "How long wilt thou halt between two opinions?" Dred asks Harry in his "high tone," before going on to shame him for not becoming a fugitive. Harry "[struck] out his hands with a frantic gesture, as if to push back the words. 'You are raising the very devil in me!'" After a few more provocative taunts from Dred, Harry "ground his teeth, and clenched his hands. 'Stop!' he cried, 'Dred, I will—I will—I'll do as you tell me—I will not be a slave!" The combined force of Dred's rhetorical suasion and his "singular and indescribable" tone of voice, "heavy as the sub-bass of an organ, and of a velvety softness," render Harry stutteringly unable to resist Dred's words (262-3).

Though Dred belongs to a lineage of African sorcerers, and though Stowe aligns him with Gullah Jack in terms of his supernatural tendencies and ability to incite loyal followers, there are important differences in the ways each of them operate. One simple mark of their difference can be illustrated by the leather pouch of corn that Dred carries with him. Corn plays an oddly central role in the Denmark Vesey trials; "parched corn" is the "charm" mentioned by Stowe that Gullah Jack disperses to the conspirators in preparation for the

attack. It is part of a regimen that is supposed to render the rebels invincible, a promise that constitutes the main crime mentioned in Gullah Jack's death sentence. Dred's corn serves a different purpose, however:

> The amusement of his vacant hours was sometimes to exercise his peculiar gifts over animal creation, by drawing towards him the birds and squirrels from the coverts of the forest, and giving them food. Indeed, he commonly carried corn…to use for this purpose. (558)

Dred here exercises a form of quite literal animal magnetism; he is said throughout the novel to be *en rapport*–another mesmeric term—with nature (354, 557). In both texts, corn plays a crucial role as a preparatory device for a radically different world to come. For Gullah Jack and the conspirators, the corn is a tool for resistance insofar as it renders rebels invulnerable—a method of bringing about the end of slavery through violent insurrection. For Dred, the corn—in addition to his innate magnetism—is a tool to help ready him for the "new earth" in which all "enmity [between humans and nature] will be taken away" (559). "After the new judgment," he explains, "the elect shall talk with the birds and beasts in the new earth. Every kind of bird has a different language, in which they show why men should magnify the Lord" (560). The corn helps to prepare Dred for life on the other side of a Judgment Day he knows is coming; following Hickman, we might read it as another instance of Dred's "posture of waiting on the Lord," but impatiently—"not merely looking for signs of God's just intentions but provoking God toward justice through the production of its own signs."[56] Thus, what the trial tries to render an embarrassingly futile accessory of Gullah Jack's, Stowe recycles as a functional but

[56] Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, p. 368.

subordinate material aid to Dred's charmed temperament—the same temperament that allows him to foresee a more divine delivery from slavery. The scene illustrates that Dred does not require special materials—certainly not putatively "charmed" ones, and certainly not ones deriving from a specifically African system of conjuration—in order to make his promises. ("'*I* am a free man! Free by this,' [says Dred] holding out his rifle" [263].)

Another marked difference between Dred and Gullah Jack is Dred's striking passivity with regard to his prescience and supernatural knowledge. When Dred manages to escape certain danger, or finds the perfect spot to lay a hunting snare, or must find someone "in whom he might safely confide," it is because he "had been warned," "had foreseen," or "had received intimations" (355). Stowe ultimately expresses ambivalence about this power; whether it is an "undeveloped attribute" of every soul, racially determined, or whether "in some individuals an extremely high and perfect condition of the sensuous organization endows them with something of that certainty of instinctive discrimination which belongs to animals," she "will not venture to decide upon" (355). In any case, however, there is nothing "artful" about it. Usually, when Dred receives a vision, it arrives upon him suddenly—he enters a "cataleptic" or "somnambulic" state (435, 348). Even when it comes to the "solemn oath" binding together the rebels in the swamp at the end of the novel, Dred is not the orchestrator of the scene but instead arises out of it, "emerg[ing] mysteriously from the darkness" to stand amongst them (566).

For Zwarg, an attentive reader of *Dred*'s investments in mesmeric healing, these trances reveal that Dred is not so much a character as a "medium," a "channel" through which flows

the energy of those around him.[57] Her larger argument is that Dred acts as a conductor for Stowe's larger experiment in mesmeric homeopathic therapy; Dred rehearses and decodes white anxieties about black vengeance. Such a reading proposes that the "cure" aimed at by the novel is not insurrection but precisely its opposite; that Dred's rebellion is stunted is precisely the point, revealing to Stowe's readers that abolition need not lead to bloodshed. I suggest we can read Dred's passive mediumship differently, in a way that preserves Dred as a character and insurrection as a real, if thwarted, possibility. When Dred enters a trance state, we can be certain that he is practicing no art of manipulation, one of the prime accusations made against conjurers in general and Gullah Jack in particular. Although he may evoke superstition in his witnesses, as he does with Harry (436) or with some of the members of his camp-meeting audience (340), in no way can he be said to delude or take advantage of others. By following the lead of writers like Moseley who used mesmerism to dismissively rewrite black esoteric practices in the Caribbean, Stowe removes the trappings and esotericism of conjure—but, crucially, she does this not to stunt but to recuperate what she perceives to be a kind of black power: by rendering Dred *himself* "an instrument of doom in a mightier hand," (558) Stowe attempts to retain the achievements of conjure while shielding Dred from the chief form of its discounting. This reading is perfectly in line with arguments mesmerists had made about the absolutely authentic status of mesmeric clairvoyance: "We believe that no man, however skilful, or ingenious he may be, can feign the magnetic state, and bear what our subjects will bear, and perform what they can perform."[58] If Gullah Jack seemed to Stowe to achieve his

[57] Zwarg, "Who's Afraid of Virginia's Nat Turner?," p. 40.
[58] *The History and Philosophy of Animal Magnetism*, p. 25.

"inconceivable influence" through dubiously fulfillable promises of invulnerability and esoteric African knowledge of charmed objects, Dred accomplishes the same almost involuntarily, with a "fierce, wailing earnestness" (340).

In Deleuze's *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, one of the first books on the subject published in the U.S., he describes the qualities of a superior magnetizer, one who can act "by the thought and by the look" or by the tones of his voice alone:[59]

> confidence in one's own power; energy of will; facility in sustaining and concentrating the attention; the sentiment of benevolence, which unites us to every suffering being; strength of mind, enabling one to remain calm in the midst of the most alarming crises; patience, which prevents uneasiness in a long and painful struggle; disinterestedness, which makes one forget himself, and devote himself to the being whom he attends, and which banishes vanity, and even curiosity. Of physical qualifications, the first is good health, the next a peculiar power, different from that which raises burdens or moves heavy bodies, and of which we recognize the existence and the degree of energy in ourselves, only by the trial we make of it.[60]

He goes on to add, "there are some somnambulists perfectly concentrated, whose interior faculties are so energetic as to act upon themselves by their own power."[61] I propose this makes a rather suitable description of Dred, with all his powers bent toward justice for the daily and eternal evils wrought by slavery. Dred may not know it, but he is in part crafted according to a

[59] Deleuze, *Practical Instruction*, pp. 38, 24.
[60] Ibid., p. 23.
[61] Ibid., p. 37.

theory of organic magnetism, by which he is capable of eliciting the utmost fear and awe without ever becoming diabolical—as he does within the "high state of electrical excitement" under which his camp-meeting audience sits. Like his father, he is "the one who [has] the hardihood to seek to use the electric fluid in the cloud thus accumulated" (268)—the hardihood and the right constitution. In the midst of "the most alarming crisis" of 1856, with sectional tensions mounting and Dred Scott's Supreme Court case on the immediate horizon—in which the court infamously determined blacks had no constitutional protections—Stowe's slave rebel emerges as figure "constitutionally" qualified for moral and political authority.

What I hope to have illustrated is Stowe's enduring interest in a version of Christianized supernaturalism—one that closely resembles the conjuring power of a figure like Gullah Jack but is displaced and distanced from conjure's culturally specific framework and materials through the theory and language of mesmerism. By displacing the conjurer to Dred's lineal past and by recasting specific African cultural and spiritual practices as spontaneous manifestations of a constitutional predisposition, Stowe can erase the cultural and material specificity of conjure while recycling an affective enchantment that avoids dissolving into superstition by attaching to Dred's magnetic personality. Dred in his swamp wields the power to heal, harm, protect, enchant, forge oaths, and otherwise offer "a considerable check on the otherwise absolute powers of the overseer" (276). In other words, Dred himself "works like a charm." The translation of these powers from African to American has been streamlined by the near-elimination of the conjurer's tools and knowledges—a process that began long before the publication of *Dred* with the eighteenth-century redescription of Vodun ceremony as a primitive form of Mesmer's new science. In *Dred*, too, this same magic is cast predominantly in

the language of mesmerism, but also that of electricity, natural science, amateur anthropology, and of course, as is abundantly clear in the book though I have paid less attention to it here, biblical prophecy and the divine power of the Christian God. I suggest that we read Dred as an updated, "mesmerizing" version of his "Mandingo" grandfather or of Gullah Jack, obsolete African sorcerers of the book's past.

Chapter Three

Black Prophecy in the Age of Jim Crow: *Pauline Carrington Bouvé's* Their Shadows Before *and* *Pauline Hopkins'* Of One Blood

"All the while, however, [mystical] phenomena are there,
lying broadcast over the surface of history."
-William James, "The Hidden Self" (1890)

Although Harriet Beecher Stowe's mesmeric Christian rebel doesn't live to see the sign that would set his insurrectionary plans into motion, Stowe affords him futurity in the form of expected fulfillment beyond his death, and indeed beyond the end of the novel. In a private conversation with the skeptical Harry, Dred assures him: "It may be that I shall not lead the tribes over this Jordan; but that I shall lay my bones in the wilderness! But the day shall surely come, and the sign of the Son of Man shall appear in the air, and all tribes of the earth shall wail, because of him!" (501). Despite the novel's seemingly tidy ending, Dred's prophecy is left open until the day of reckoning for slavery's sins arrives.

The dawning of the Civil War would furnish the obvious day of reckoning for Pauline Carrington Bouvé's 1899 *Their Shadows Before: A Story of the Southampton Insurrection.* In her fictionalization of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, Bouvé's "Black Prophet" accurately foretells the coming war, announcing from the gallows that in "three times ten years," "blood shall be shed and the bonds shall be broken" (198). While on its surface this gesture might seem to affirm Nathaniel's prophetic power, it does so by expending *Dred*'s lingering potentiality, positioning the Civil War as the satisfying fulfillment of the prophet's revolutionary ambition. At the end of a decade that had made abundantly

clear the failures of Reconstruction, with Jim Crow segregation in full force and the extralegal lynching of black men at its height, this fiction would seem an especially unsatisfying one. Pauline Hopkins' 1902-3 serial novel *Of One Blood, or, The Hidden Self* paints a thorough picture of just this dissatisfaction: in her novel, too, an antebellum black clairvoyant predicts the coming war. To a parlor crowd gathered to witness the enslaved Mira's clairvoyance, she announces to great alarm that "all the women will be widows and the men shall sleep in early graves" (486-7). Yet through the rest of the novel, set in late-nineteenth-century Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, later, Africa, the deceased Mira's ghost continues to haunt the novel's protagonists, her estranged and struggling children, indicating to them that things still aren't right. It is only once the novel opens onto a new prophetic timeline—one of an ancient Ethiopian royal line returning to eminence—that the cyclically repeating pattern of slavery's traumas and injustices can begin to be disrupted. For Bouvé, the need for black prophecy ends with emancipation; for Hopkins, an entirely new era of black prophecy must be enacted.

While both Paulines, one white and one black, were astonishingly active in the Boston literary scene in the early years of the twentieth century—Bouvé wrote for the *Boston Sunday Globe* and published stories, poems, and novels for a mainly white audience, and Hopkins, writing for a primarily black middle-class audience, published abundant fiction and nonfiction and served as editor and writer for the *Colored American Magazine* and contributor to the *Voice of the Negro*—there's no direct evidence they read each other's work. The novels in question, too, have yet to be read together, having been sorted by critics into different literary-historical bins, a move justified by and also symptomatic of the consolidation of Jim Crow in response to

which both write. Despite its fantastic elements, Bouvé's *Their Shadows Before* was advertised in newspapers as a historical fiction, with one reviewer claiming it only "var[ies] from the historic view" where it would "hinder the effect of" her "love-plot."[1] Recent treatments of the novel have read it as a revision of Stowe's antislavery novels and G. P. R. James's *The Old Dominion* (1856) or a precursor to Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936) and Frances Gaither's *The Red Cock Crows* (1944), all of which engage historical U.S. slave rebellions.[2] Probably written with a young adult audience in mind, the story is told from the perspective of Penelope, a sympathetic white child living on her grandparents' Virginia plantation at the time of Nat Turner's rebellion who finds herself central to its action. *Of One Blood*, on the other hand, is often considered an early work of African American speculative fiction or Afrofuturism, alongside Sutton Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) or W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet" (1920).[3] The plot juggles hidden identities, explorations of the New Psychology, and an archeological expedition to a hidden African city, among other intrigues, as it follows a struggling, white-passing mesmeric doctor who turns out to be, as hinted at earlier, a lost Ethiopian king. At a moment when the gains of emancipation seemed to be coming undone, these two novels process the traumas of slavery in different ways: if Bouvé seeks to "recuperate" the memory of the Southampton uprising by placing a self-sacrificing (and semi-autobiographical) white child at its center, for Hopkins, the traumas of slavery seem "melancholically" inescapable, to quote

[1] "Our Boston Literary Letter," *Springfield Daily Republican*, 29 November 1899, p. 11.
[2] See John L. Grigsby, "Jesus, Judas, Job or 'Jes a Happy Ole Nigga'; or, Will the Real 'Uncle Tom' Please Step Forward," and Lynn Veach Sadler, "The Figure of the Black Insurrectionist in Stowe, Bouvé, Bontemps, and Gaither: Universality of the Need for Freedom."
[3] See, for example, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*, Jalondra A. Davis, "Utopia and the Gendered Past in Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self*," and Isiah Lavender III, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*.

Dana Luciano's reading of the novel, as the three estranged siblings at the center of her novel's plot unwittingly enter coerced and coercive incestuous relations with one another all the while haunted by ghostly apparitions of their mother, Mira.[4]

While the late nineteenth century saw a rise in popularity of African American folklore tales and figures by authors both black and white, with Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales* and Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories chief among them, I find a quite different engagement with occultism at work in these two novels. For although these folkloric stories recount supernatural happenings, always foregrounded is the fact that the reader is hearing a tale with a message to be distilled. In Bouvé's and Hopkins' novels, there is no mediating storyteller: the reader witnesses supernatural happenings in real time that do not strike one as "overtly allegorical," as Shirley Moody-Turner says of Chesnutt's conjure tales.[5] If the meaning of a story of an enslaved person being transformed into a tree and harvested for lumber can be discerned whether one believes such a thing happened or not, a novel like *Of One Blood* relies on the reader accepting the supernatural events they witness to be "true," at least in the context of the story. Indeed, to quote Nadia Nurhussein, Hopkins took a "documentary" approach to her Ethiopianism, pairing chapters of *Of One Blood* that depict encounters with fantastic or mythic Ethiopia with historical, biographical, and ethnographic pieces about modern-day Africa in the pages of the *Colored American Magazine*. While this "clashing of genres" led to confusing and "conflicting messages" about Ethiopia, as Nurhussein argues, the approach shows Hopkins' attempt at grounding the fantastic

[4] Luciano, "Passing Shadows: Melancholic Nationality and Black Critical Publicity in Pauline E. Hopkins's *Of One Blood*."
[5] "Folklore and African American Literature in the Post-Reconstruction Era," p. 210.

happenings of the novel in fact.[6] There are no verifying footnotes or adjacent texts, that is, in *The Conjure Woman*, as there are in both *Their Shadows Before* and alongside *Of One Blood*'s serial installments.

I would argue instead that we see these works as belonging to the literature of occult resistance I've been tracing here—a century of literature which directly or indirectly registers the real possibility of an occult threat to power while also refusing or reformulating that threat in new terms. Responding all but directly to the "dis-charming" of Gullah Jack and the "mesmerization" of the supernatural black hero at the hands of Stowe and others, both of these novels revive and reinvent occult black figures who intervene in the unfolding of history—through apparitions, auspicious signs, potions, and mesmeric hand-waving—but to quite different ends. At the turn of the century, Bouvé and Hopkins return to the question that Caribbean lawmakers, the Charleston magistrates, and the authors of mesmeric rebellion so often located at the crux of the crisis—could occult power disrupt the regimes of white supremacism?—as a means of envisioning what futures were possible in the wake of the failures of Reconstruction, when the violent relations of slavery would seem long in dying. As I'll show, Bouvé's novel depicts an occult-inflected interracial solidarity between a mesmeric rebel and a literary young woman that ultimately makes way for the possibility of a white, woman-led national unity. Hopkins, on the other hand, reverses the narrative that reads the esoteric practices associated with obeah, vodou, and conjure as so many examples of primitive or "rough magnetizing" and instead locates the source of Mira's family's occult facility in another

[6] Nurhussein, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America*, pp. 52-3.

mythic imperial power: an ancient, dormant Ethiopian civilization that awaits the return of her royal family line.

Retiring Occultism in Their Shadows Before

In late August of 1899, Bouvé sat down to interview Charles Chesnutt, whose popular short story collection *The Conjure Woman* had been released earlier that year. Though she chides him for "show[ing] a bitterness sometimes toward the white people of the South," the interview is pitched as an admiring one, finding "genius" in his stories. "Here is an educated, cultivated man," Bouvé writes, "able to thoroughly project himself into the experiences and feelings of the most unlettered, superstitious old negro men and women of the slave regime," and "[portray] with the effect of actuality a period of which he can have no personal knowledge." After speculating that his "mental qualities" may be attributed to his unique "mixture of bloods"—"negro," "Indian," and an "overwhelming" "percentage of Caucasian"—she advises her reader to follow closely his upcoming work: a biography of Frederick Douglass to be published in the fall by Small, Maynard, & Co. Along with Booker T. Washington's forthcoming *The Future of the American Negro*, Chesnutt's biography, Bouvé argues, will inaugurate a "new line of thought" on the two "races [which] have had much to bear."[7]

Advertised alongside Chesnutt's and Washington's books in Small, Maynard, & Co.'s fall catalogue was Bouvé's own *Their Shadows Before*, a work which may itself be considered a "thorough projection" into precisely the same place and period of which the author, born in

[7] "An Aboriginal Author: The Work and Personality of Charles W. Chesnutt." *Boston Evening Transcript*, 23 August 1899, p. 16.

1860, "can have no personal knowledge."[8] The novel mainly takes place in the [slave] quarters of the Virginia plantation where the young white narrator spends most of her time. Having chosen the story of the Southampton Insurrection for her debut novel, it is difficult not to imagine Bouvé considering her own literary projection an attempt at "genius," an important contribution to the problem of "hostility between the races." The book opens, after all, with the young Penelope asking the enslaved Uncle Isham, "Did you ever hate white people?" (7).

It is not particularly surprising that, in the years after *Plessy v. Ferguson* sanctified Jim Crow segregation, Nat Turner would reappear. In her thorough survey of fictionalizations of Nat Turner from *Dred* to William Styron's 1967 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Mary Kemp Davis writes that Nat Turner has been "rearraigned, retried, and resentenced many times during the last century and a half," his characterization serving as a cipher for the racial politics of the moment.[9] The abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson's sympathetic portrait, for example, published just months after the start of the Civil War, describes Nat Turner as a "poor negro" who "devoted himself soul and body to the cause of his race" and who lives on as "a symbol of wild retribution."[10] Conversely, William Sidney Drewry ends his 1900 account of the insurrection—in which he describes Nat as a "complete fanatic," a "spoiled child," and an "important and useful lesson in the experience of a mind … endeavoring to grapple with things beyond its reach"—by advocating against black education and for the colonization of black

[8] "News of New Books." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 September 1899, p. 31.
[9] *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection*, p. 3.
[10] "Nat Turner's Insurrection." *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1861), pp. 173-87. I cite a version printed in *Black Rebellion: Five Slave Revolts*, pp. 206, 212.

citizens "beyond the limits of the United States."[11] From the publication of Nat Turner's so-called *Confessions* forward—transcribed with an unknown degree of mediation by the white lawyer Thomas Gray in the days before his death—politically motivated writers have considered the story of the Southampton insurrection theirs to tell.

It may be more surprising—in light of both her racist and condescending portrait of Chesnutt and the fact that her father served as a Confederate general—that Bouvé's depiction of Nat Turner's rebellion largely has been considered a sympathetic one.[12] Scot French, for example, considers Bouvé's depiction to be "the boldest challenge to the proslavery image of Nat Turner as a bloodthirsty religious fanatic who hated all whites," and Rebecca Skidmore Biggio argues the novel provides an "alternative narrative of positive black masculinity in defiance of post-Reconstruction stereotypes" that were rooted in minstrel depictions of "the comic and contented slave" or white supremacist depictions of innate violence and animality.[13] To be sure, the novel's characterization of Nat Turner is a heroic one; its final pages insist that his actions brought about John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and the Civil War, all of which was preordained by "God's will" (202). But to the extent that the novel affords "Nathaniel" radical power—visionary leadership, confirmed occult powers, and alignment with Christian prophecy—this power is locked in an antebellum past, building towards and ending with the Civil War and emancipation. Retold in a post-Reconstruction literary and political moment

[11] *The Southampton Insurrection,* pp. 113-6, 191.
[12] I have been unable to find much more information about this, but an 1861 letter does mention that her father, Albert Rust, had Unionist sympathies. See "Letter from John Campbell, Unionist," p. 180.
[13] French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory*, p. 160. Biggio, *The Riotous Presence in American Literature and Culture*, p. 123. In the second quote, Biggio cites Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, p. 51. See also Joseph A. Young, "Erasure and Retrieval of Public Memory: Artful Deceit in Mary Johnston's *Prisoners of Hope* and Subtle Disclosure in Pauline Bouvé's *Their Shadows Before*."

dominated by what Nina Silber has called the "romance of reunion," *Dred*'s plantation romance-turned-simmering insurrection storyline reverses course: Nat Turner's rebellion in Bouvé's hands becomes little more than an enchanting backdrop for a North-South marriage plot—portrayed as righteous, perhaps, but evacuated of present-day political potential.[14]

Bouvé's "Black Prophet"

Bouvé's story, which received little recognition beyond its moment and has since fallen into obscurity, deserves a close summary. As mentioned earlier, the novel follows Penelope, a white child on her grandparents' plantation who feels more at home in the "quarters" than with her white family. Frustrated that her grandparents have enlisted a new tutor—Basil Mortimer, a Northern Harvard graduate—to take charge of her education, Penelope seeks "solace" from Mammy and Uncle Isham (17).[15] While visiting their cabin, she hears a young enslaved boy about to be whipped by an overseer. Without thinking, she dives beneath the lash and is struck instead. Nathaniel Turner, witness to the scene, determines Penelope is "the white lamb for the black sheep," or the "sign" that is to set in motion the coming insurrection (25). In the ensuing weeks, Penelope encounters Nathaniel twice more: once, when he rescues her from a raging bull by mesmerizing it into docility, and a second time, when she and Mortimer are collecting plant specimens in the Great Dismal Swamp and happen upon a meeting of rebels

[14] Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*. Also of interest on this point: for two decades after the war, *Dred* was sometimes republished under the title *Nina Gordon*, the name of the white protagonist of Vol. 1 who dies during a cholera outbreak while caring for her slaves, thereby bringing an end to *Dred*'s plantation romance. If Penelope is Bouvé's resurrection of Nina, this post-bellum title change might be seen as Stowe's publishers' own attempt at resurrection.

[15] "Mammy" quite obviously fits the stereotype described by Hale in *Making Whiteness*: "nurturer, protector, and teacher of white children" (98ff).

apparently under Nathaniel's mesmeric spell. When the day of the uprising finally arrives, signaled by a large, black figure of a man in the clouds, Mammy and Nathaniel intervene to protect Penelope, who has been "marked" as a result of shielding the boy from the whip (126). Nathaniel hides her in a cave while the violence unfolds and releases her the following night, having mesmerized her into forgetting his location. With Nathaniel still missing, a white mob forms and captures Mortimer, happy to kill an "abolitionist" if they can't find the insurrectionist. At the final moment, Nathaniel is apprehended and Mortimer set free. Just before being sent to the gallows, Nathaniel gives Penelope a written copy of his "testimony" for her to "[hand] down to the people of her race and of mine" (192). The novel's final pages jump forward thirty years: Mortimer and Penelope are married, and John Brown's raid has just occurred. Penelope announces that Nathaniel's gallows prophecy—"a freed nation and a river of blood"—is finally coming to pass (198).

As the most well-known fictionalization of Nat Turner of the nineteenth century, and indeed the only one to cast him as a swamp-dwelling, mesmeric prophet, *Dred* couldn't have been far from Bouvé's mind as she crafted her own rebel. While there is no direct evidence Bouvé saw herself writing in the tradition of Stowe, her reviewers certainly read her that way. In a 1903 review of her blossoming literary career, a Virginia newspaper predicted *Their Shadows Before* would "hold a higher place in the future in the literature of the war than even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," and an 1899 review refers to Bouvé's Nat Turner as "a half-crazed, half-

inspired prophet after the pattern of Mrs. Stowe's 'Dred.'"[16] One contemporary critic asserts the novel's title is taken from the text of *Dred*, but while the expression ("coming events cast their shadows before") does appear in the chapter titled "The Troubadour," it is not an uncommon one; it is, in fact, a chapter title in Hopkins' novel *Contending Forces.*[17] The best evidence, as I've suggested, is in Bouvé's characterization of Nat Turner and the supernatural sway he holds over others, human and animal. Though he lacks the alternation of high and low modes that renders Dred so captivating, Nathaniel's mesmeric prophesying recalls Dred's more powerful moments of scripturally-inflected exhortation. When we first see Nathaniel, for example, his listener gazes fixedly upon him with "widely-distended eyes" as he warns that "the time is near" when "the bondman shall know that Nathaniel hath spoken the Word of the Lord!" (23-5). Later, when Mortimer and Penelope encounter the rebels' secret meeting in the swamp, Penelope asks her tutor why Nathaniel's listeners become so entranced by him. Is it "Voodoo," she wonders? Dramatizing Stowe's own explanation of Dred's power, Mortimer responds, "It's probably a case of unconscious mesmeric influence" (108).

But while Stowe pairs her rebel's supernatural power with complex and subversive jeremiadic speech, Bouvé primarily writes disruptiveness unto Nathaniel's body rather than into his words, doubling down on the incarnate (rather than esoteric or ideological) quality of his power.[18] She follows the historical record in giving him a short stature but makes some dramatic departures in going on to describe him as "misshapen" and of unusual muscular

[16] From the *Page News* (Luray, VA), 30 June 1903. This article is cited in Robert H. Moore II, "A Confederate general's daughter embraces New England." Second review: "Current Fiction," in *The Literary World* [Boston], vol. 30, January-December 1899, p. 157.
[17] Davis, pp. 169-70.
[18] On Dred's speech, see Jacob Stratman's "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Preachers of the Swamp: 'Dred' and the Jeremiad."

strength, with eyes which glare with an intensity that "produce[s] the peculiar effect of double pupils" (24). The description of Nat Turner that was circulated before his capture does mention "a large knob on one of the bones of his arm near the wrist *produced by a blow*"; Bouvé erases the knob's violent origin and instead describes Nathaniel's "distorted" body as itself generating "protuberances that *grew* from each side of the collar-bone" (24, my emphases).[19] While some of these details likely derive from blackface minstrelsy, particularly his "glaring" eyes, this association of an "unusual" or "deformed" body and magical ability also follows descriptions of black "sorcerers" by Benjamin Moseley, Victor Hugo in *Bug-Jargal* (1826), and William Earle in *Obi, or, The History of Three Fingered Jack*, in which we learn, "The more they are deformed, the more they are venerated, and their charm credited as the strongest." Though she follows Stowe in explicitly dissociating the Christian Nathaniel from accusations of "voodoo" throughout the book, Bouvé also appears to return to earlier nineteenth-century depictions of Caribbean occult figures, perhaps in response to the popularity of depictions of "voodoo" in print and on the stage in the 1890s—including in stagings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[20]

Even considering the typology of the "deformed" sorcerer, Nathaniel's hands—through which he exercises the greatest degree of his power—are notable. Throughout the novel, Nathaniel practices the art of "wavin' hands" (84), through which he manipulates animals, erases and restores memories, and initiates submissive trance states. But it isn't just the

[19] My emphasis in the physical description of Nat Turner, which can be found in *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*, p. 423.

[20] Earle, p. 119. Stagings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* throughout the decade included all-new "Voodoo worship" scenes, either in the final act or during intermission. See Silber's *Romance of Reunion*, p. 142 and Marshall W. Stearns' *The Story of Jazz,* p. 118. For an example of an advertisement mentioning an added "voodoo" scene, see *The Boston Daily Advertiser*, 20 August 1888, p. 1. By my scanning, at least four different directors included such scenes across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

movement of his hands that is striking: from the wrists to the fingertips, his skin is entirely white (24). Bouvé's choice to give Nathaniel an apparent case of vitiligo is a curious one. As far as I can tell, no other representation, fictional or otherwise, of the historical Nat Turner describes his skin as having "white spots" (104). If we read Bouvé's Nathaniel as an attempt to capture Stowe's political energy at almost exclusively surface level, it is possible she sought to make a visual case for abolition that would be accessible even to an insulated white Southern child. The gesture would have precedent in the abolitionist Moses Brown's reflection on Henry Moss, who in the late eighteenth century monetized white curiosity about "racial origins" by putting his own case of depigmentation on display. Brown considered Moss's skin "evidence of the sameness of human nature and corresponding with the declaration of the Apostle, that, 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men.' For we see in him one and the same blood sustains a man that appears to our sense, both black and white."[21] Indeed, the only comment Penelope makes on Nathaniel's skin is that parts of it were "as white *as my own*," rendering his (white) skin an occasion for momentary sympathetic identification (24, my emphasis).

The White Lamb for the Black Prophet

With Nathaniel left a rather flattened caricature of Stowe's mystical insurrectionist, his rebellion comes to be sympathetically depicted mainly through its association with Penelope,

[21] Quoted in John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*, pp. 271-2. See also Charles D. Martin, *The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration* and Temi Odumosu, "Burthened Bodies: the Image and Cultural Work of 'White Negroes' in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic World."

whose seemingly instinctive urge to put her body between Jim and the lash becomes the authorizing sign for the insurrectionary plans to commence. Here, perhaps, is another echo from *Dred*: after Dred demonstrates his animal magnetism to the young white Fanny Peyton, a skill that he explains will belong to all of "the elect" after the "great judgment," Fanny asks Dred who the elect will be. He responds:

> "They are the hundred and forty and four thousand, that follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. And the angels have charge, saying, 'Hurt not the earth till these are sealed in their forehead.'"
>
> Fanny instinctively put her hand to her forehead. "Do you think they'll seal me?" she said.
>
> "Yes," said Dred; "such as you are of the kingdom." (218)

In *Their Shadows Before*, after Penelope receives the lash meant for Jim, Nathaniel traces a circle in her own blood on her forehead, then "[spreads] out his hands as in prayer" and says, "Lord Jesus, behold the mark!" (30-1). For Penelope to be sealed in this context establishes two things: first, it identifies white-on-white violence as the rebellion's, and therefore the War's, precipitating event. Presumably, had Jim been whipped as the overseer intended, life on the plantation would have continued as usual; that Penelope's blood is drawn instead charges the event with divine significance. Second, the "great judgment" mentioned by Dred comes to represent not the Christian millennium, but instead the Civil War, thereby "sealing" racial struggle in history as part of what David W. Blight has called an "inexorable drive for reunion

[that] both used and trumped race."[22] If Stowe impatiently defers her rebel's action through a "posture of waiting on the Lord," to quote Jared Hickman, Bouvé's Lord delivers, but in such a way that the black rebel's work is always already "achieved" by emancipation.[23]

But Penelope's role in the narrative is not just as a sign to be interpreted by Nathaniel; she also participates in the interpretation of occult signs and meanings, herself. It is Penelope, after all, who determines that Nathaniel's prophecy is about to be fulfilled by the War. Throughout the novel, Penelope links her own emerging sense of racial antagonism to her larger interest in all things supernatural. In the opening scene, in which Penelope asks Uncle Isham whether he "hates" white people or "wishes to be" one, she explains her motivation for asking: "Perhaps it is because I think a good deal about fairies and witches." Having grown up thus far exclusively under the authority of her slaveholding grandparents, the alternative authority of the supernatural realm provides the means by which Penelope can begin to conceive a challenge to the status quo. When Isham deflects, countering that she should stick to the Bible, she returns, "Oh, that's just full of wizards and witches and soothsayers,—like conjurers and Voodoos, you know" (8). Penelope pauses to perform a correction (there are witches in the Bible) and a translation across idioms ("witches" to "conjurers") that she thinks is appropriate for her audience, and in doing so perfectly positions herself as a natural "philosopher of superstition" in the line of Stowe and the mesmerists.

It is because of this posture of critical belief—taking an interest in the occult but with a discerning, anthropological eye—that she and Nathaniel are able to connect. Confronting

[22] Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, p. 2.
[23] Hickman, p. 368.

Nathaniel from within his cave after he's rescued her from rebels who wish to make her into a human sacrifice, Penelope accuses him of "making" the men "mad," whipping them into a frenzy via the late-night ritual that she and Mortimer had previously stumbled upon in the swamp. Nathaniel admits that "the workman must have his tools," but that he isn't "a Voodoo" as they are, for he "never asked for the goat without horns" (138-9). The line likely refers to a scene in H. Rider Haggard's popular *She: A History of Adventure* (1886-7) in which members of a "savage" African tribe attempt to cannibalize an outsider, referring to him as "the goat without horns."[24] Having learned that Nathaniel, too, dismisses this as a lower form of occultism, distinguishing it from his own divinely-inspired mesmerism, Penelope changes her tune: "I don't think you mean to be bad," she admits (139).[25] Having together recognized and confirmed a moral hierarchy of occult resistance, Nathaniel and Penelope remain allies throughout the narrative. Penelope defends him to her grandparents and speaks in his favor at this trial, and Nathaniel places Penelope in charge of his "testimony" after his death (186-7, 192). The white woman writer ("Pen," as she is nicknamed) thus becomes the "authorized" interpreter and historian of occult resistance.

If Stowe retires the black conjurer to make way for her Christianized, mesmerizing "warrior prophet," Bouvé goes one step further, retiring the Black Prophet, with whom "time [has] settled accounts," and positioning herself as the literary inheritor of his tradition (199).

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[24] Haggard, pp. 81, 97-99. An article titled "On Võdu-Worship" by A.B. Ellis in *The Popular Science Monthly* also mentions such a ceremony (660-61), quoting Spencer St. John's racist and sensationalist *Hayti: or, The Black Republic*, pp. 191-2.

[25] This does somewhat echo a comment recorded in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: "Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow servants, (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks—for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt) but by the communion of the Spirit whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God" (7-8). In *Their Shadows Before*, "voodoo" is not dismissed as a set of "tricks" but rather a more dangerous and barbaric form of revolt.

While the novel confirms Nathaniel's power as indeed real and verifiable, even providing a footnote to confirm the historical existence of the ominous "atmospheric phenomena" that preceded the revolt, it does so by relegating such power to the past (112). The occult rebel "after the pattern of" Stowe, recapitulated in a post-Reconstruction moment overwhelmed by the "forces of reconciliation," is sapped of all political potential, existing only as a revolutionary veneer. The novel ends with the marriage of the Northern Mortimer and the Southern Penelope, a trope which, on Silber's account, "stood at the foundation of the late-nineteenth-century culture of conciliation."[26] When Penelope asks Mortimer, after reading of John Brown's raid in the newspaper, "do you remember that dreadful day in Southampton, thirty years ago," he can only reply, "When you plighted your troth to me?" Playing her part of dutiful historian—ironizing, however slightly, the romance of reunion—Penelope disrupts his rose-colored reminiscence: "Do you remember what Nat Turner said,—'I see battles, fire, freedom'?" (201). Still, Bouvé's novel can offer no more than this gentle memorial push against the conciliationist frame she's written Nathaniel into; the sliver of future left open by the novel belongs only to Penelope and her "two fair-haired girls with hazel eyes" (200). Nat Turner can be remembered—indeed *should* be remembered—but only as a dead hero among the living.

Revisionary Occultism in Of One Blood

The occult power depicted in *Of One Blood*, though muffled and distorted by the conditions of life in the U.S., is for Hopkins very much alive. Though she was a prolific writer in a number of genres, the exploration of occult power was strictly the province of Hopkins' fiction. While

[26] *Romance of Reunion*, p. 19.

the majority of her fictional works contain references to conjuring, mesmerism, and magnetic influence—and even sustained engagements in "The Mystery Within Us" (1900), *Contending Forces* (1900), and of course *Of One Blood*—Hopkins rarely uses such language or explores such ideas in her nonfiction.[27] From her novels and short stories alone, however, it is clear she was well read in the literature of mesmerism, spiritualism, and the New Psychology—the burgeoning science of trance-states and the unconscious mind associated with Jean-Martin Charcot, William James, and others.[28] Most obviously, *Of One Blood* takes its subtitle—*The Hidden Self*—from an essay by James. As is now well known, Hopkins plagiarized an impressive number of works across her fiction; Geoffrey Sanborn's thorough documentation of her "sources" for *Of One Blood* lists studies in hypnotism, occult philosophy, and popular newspaper accounts of mesmeric cures. Hopkins also borrows extensively from prominent British spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten's novel *The Wildfire Club* (1861) and features a minor character who shares a name with Cora Scott, a famous U.S. medium.[29] And as Cynthia Schrager has argued, she was attentive to the tropes of mesmeric fiction and careful to distinguish her magnetic doctors from the notorious seducers and exploiters of popular works

[27] She does, curiously, describe Booker T. Washington—with whom she had a contentious relationship—as having a "magnetic influence which radiates from him in all directions." See her essay "Famous Men of the Negro Race: Booker T. Washington," p. 441.

[28] Particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century, mesmeric and spiritualist theories and practices became quite fused, especially with regards to the question of clairvoyance and the trance state. It could be said that spiritualism provided parlor mesmerism the notion of an afterlife populated with spirits and ghosts with which to commune. Or, to quote the mesmerist/spiritualist Allen Putnam, "When these spirits are embodied, we call their work mesmeric… [and] when the spirits are disembodied, we call their operations Spiritualism" (6). See Emily Ogden's *Credulity: A Cultural History of U.S. Mesmerism*, 217ff.

[29] See Sanborn's essay, "The Wind of Words: Plagiarism and Intertextuality in *Of One Blood*" and webpage, "Plagiarism in *Of One Blood*."

like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Henry James's *The Bostonians*.[30] Hopkins was clearly steeped in both esoteric and literary articulations of the occult sciences.

Whatever prompted her avoidance of occult subjects in her nonfiction writing, then, can only be guessed at, but it feels to me a noticeable absence. She was certainly aware that, in the Jim Crow era especially, expressions of belief or behavior that seemed irrational or superstitious could be subject to appropriation by segregationists seeking to identify distinct "cultural traits" that would justify racial hierarchy—as evidenced even by Bouvé's "admiring" portrait of Chesnutt.[31] In *Contending Forces*, perhaps inspired by Frederick Douglass's 1893 lecture on Haiti, Hopkins challenges this racist discourse not by insisting on the rationality of her black characters but rather by highlighting the ubiquity of *white* belief in the supernatural: "the Negro no longer holds the distinction of being the only race that believes in the pretensions of those who claim to be able to look into the future with mesmerized sight favored by hidden powers" (198-9). As Douglass had argued a few years earlier, "If men are denied a future civilization because of superstition, there are others than the people of Haiti who must be so denied. In one form or another, superstition will be found everywhere and among all sorts of people, high or low."[32] The case of the white fortune-seeker or séance circle reveals the racial logic behind which occult beliefs can co-exist with "civilization" and which cannot. It makes sense, then, that Hopkins would attempt the development of a sophisticated, African-derived black mysticism in the realm of fiction—a realm which, according to Hazel V.

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[30] "Pauline Hopkins and William James: The New Psychology and the Politics of Race," in *The Unruly Voice*, 193-4.

[31] See Shirley Moody-Turner's *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation.*

[32] *Lecture on Haiti*. Hopkins was familiar with Douglass's lecture, as she mentions it in her essay on "Toussaint L'Overture" in the *Colored American Magazine*, p. 24.

Carby, Hopkins saw as having a "pedagogic function"—where the question of readerly incredulity, black or white, can be safely shelved.[33] Thus, for reasons of her own, Hopkins continues the tradition of a specifically literary representation and exploration of black occultism, finding in fiction a useful cover both to avoid white supremacist accusations of African American "superstition" and to stage a sharp critique of the hypocrisy latent in such a charge given the prevalence of "white" superstition.

Before going into detail about the revisionary occultism that Hopkins' novel undertakes, a brief summary. The action picks up when Reuel Briggs, the white-passing, Harvard-educated doctor at the novel's center, spectacularly revivifies Dianthe Lusk, a woman who has seemingly died in a train accident. He has seen the woman thrice before: in a mysterious, intoxicating vision at the novel's opening, performing on stage later as the star soprano of the Fisk Jubilee singers, and yet again as a ghostly projected figure on Halloween night, just before the train accident. During her slow recovery, Dianthe agrees to marry the increasingly devoted Reuel. His jealous friend and once-benefactor Aubrey Livingston, possessed of not just mesmeric but financial power, secures a job for the struggling Reuel on an archeological team headed for Ethiopia. With Reuel gone, he manages to convince Reuel and Dianthe of each other's deaths and entrances Dianthe into an unhappy marriage. A distraught Reuel wanders through the ruins of Meroe until he finds himself in an entirely hidden, still-living ancient civilization called Telassar. Here, the second half of the novel commences. Reuel makes a number of discoveries: that he belongs to an ancient royal line and his coming has been long awaited by the city, and that the source of his occult power is this

[33] See Carby's Introduction to *The Magazine Novels*, xxxv.

royal Ethiopian heritage. Back in the U.S., Dianthe has a much ruder awakening: Hannah, an old "voodoo" woman who turns out to be her grandmother, informs her that she, Reuel, and Aubrey are full siblings, sharing the same white, slaveholding father, Aubrey Livingston, Sr., and an enslaved mother, Mira. Through a cradle swap, Aubrey was raised as a white son while Reuel and Dianthe remained enslaved. After yet another vision of the distressed Dianthe, Reuel returns to the U.S. too late to save her; she dies when Aubrey forces her to drink poison she had intended for him. Reuel and Hannah return to Telassar to restore glory to the ancient kingdom.

Supernatural happenings, both willed and seemingly spontaneous, guide the movement of the plot: chance magnetic attractions, visions of the living and the dead, healing and coercive entrancements, and esoteric practices rooted in both Western and African traditions, to name a few. Critics have variously attempted to account for the novel's idiosyncratic occultism often by attributing what appears to be its unlikely confluence of Jamesian New Psychology, Euro-American occult sciences, and Ethiopianist mysticism to Hopkins, herself. Susan Gillman, for instance, argues that the novel presents "an African-American adaptation of a minority position within the discipline of psychology" through its "syncretism," rather than opposition, of Euro-American science and African spiritualism, while for Thomas J. Otten, Hopkins "recognizes and insists upon the affinities" between popular new psychologies and African American tradition in order to "authenticate" or "[validate] a distinctly African understanding of the mind's nature." More recently, John J. Kucich has argued that this "affinity" reveals, for Hopkins, the "universalism of science and the tenacity of African cultural heritage. … [I]n the mind of the New Negro, an au courant mastery of European-American

science can coexist with a fully acknowledged African heritage."[34] What the language of "syncretism," "affinities," and "coexistence" misses, however, is that the Euro-American popular occultism that Hopkins engages had already explicitly articulated itself to be a systematized, elevated form of the so-called primitive and disparate magical practices of Africans and diasporic blacks. As I discuss in chapter two, mesmerists as early as the 1830s saw their practice not as opposed to or distinct from West Indian obeah or American hoodoo, but as a more sophisticated and better theorized version of the same thing. We see a lingering glimpse of this attitude in James's "The Hidden Self," where he explains, "The way to redeem people from barbarism is not to stand aloof and sneer at their awkward attempts, but to show them how to do the same things better."[35] Hopkins didn't engage such traditions to bring them into proximity with her interest in African mysticism, but rather to contest and reverse the narrative they'd already promoted regarding their own mastery of black occultism. On Hopkins' telling, if mesmerism relies upon the same "universal law" behind the supernatural activity of "all ages and nations," it is in fact the Euro-American mesmerists who practice a rudimentary version of the ancient African magic they claim is primitive and contingent.[36]

While this work of reversal is most fully developed in *Of One Blood*, Hopkins hints at it in her earlier fiction, as well. When the formerly enslaved mesmeric doctor Abraham Peters claims in *Contending Forces* that "magnifyin' an' hoodooin' is 'bout the same thing" (132), he subverts the mesmerist William Gregory's patronizing claim that "negroes … are both highly

[34] Gillman, "Pauline Hopkins and the Occult: African-American Revisions of Nineteenth-Century Sciences," pp. 72, 75; Otten. "Pauline Hopkins and the Hidden Self of Race," pp. 240-1; Kucich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, p. 182.
[35] "The Hidden Self," p. 372.
[36] Allen Putnam, *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Witchcraft, and Miracle*, pp. 8, 34.

susceptible subjects, and very powerful magnetisers" by accepting that hoodoo and magnetism express the same power but refusing to render one more advanced than the other—the two are "bout the same."[37] Gesturing beyond this, the book's narrator explains, "the Negro is thought to possess wonderful powers of necromancy. … But transplant them on a foreign shore and much of their supposed power vanishes" (198). Some have read this as a tongue-in-cheek repetition of, say, a fortune-teller's disclaimer ("My powers don't work as well, here"), however I think it's quite possible to read this as a precursor to the work she would continue in *Of One Blood* by sending the mesmeric Reuel to Africa to clarify and recuperate his full power. In such a society, unimpeded by the oppressive and denigrating regime of white supremacy that would "vanish" such "wonderful powers," they can be freely explored and developed.

While the supernaturalism that drives the esoteric technologies of Telassar— "discs" and "fonts" that allow a user to view past, present, or future; "pure" architectural substances; the preservation of flowers and corpses in crystal—is revealed to be precisely the same as what drives the occult happenings of the American half of the novel, this power works quite differently on U.S. soil. In contrast to the abundance of miraculous objects and materials of Telassar, the only supernatural material in the U.S. is the powder Reuel administers to Dianthe to revivify her, a compound he has developed that is an "exact reproduction of the conditions existing in the human body" (469).[38] The powder distinguishes Reuel's occult

[37] *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism*, p. 105. Peters may also be echoing the black occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph, who in 1870 claimed, "The whole thing [hoodoo] is purely magnetic." *Seership! The Magnetic Mirror*, p. 21.

[38] Hopkins pulls her description of the powder from an article printed in the *Boston Daily Globe* just over two months before the chapter appeared in *The Colored American*. "Discovers the Secret of Life," 29 September 1902, p. 9.

practice from that of the other U.S. occultists in the novel, specifically the two generations of Aubrey Livingstons. It is not only the ends of their mesmerism—Reuel's benevolent and the Livingstons' nefarious—but the means that differ. Consonant with most mesmeric doctrines in the second half of the century, the Livingstons elicit trance-states and render subjects "quiescent" through the passing of hands or the fixing of a magnetic gaze, whereas Reuel makes use of a powder that connects him, however tenuously, to the occult materialism of Telassar—and, it should be mentioned, to the charms distributed by Gullah Jack (597). Rendering his power material by esoteric means, literally distilling from the air the "volatile magnetism" that is the "secret of life," Reuel unveils a twentieth-century version of Jack's parched corn and crab-claws—his charms of invincibility (468).

Reuel's powder is a trace of Telassar that simultaneously insists on the vitality of his African origins and acknowledges the acidity of white supremacist society. African power/knowledge is undeniably diminished and distorted in the post-Reconstruction U.S., as reflected in the unpredictability and ambiguity of supernatural visitations in the novel: when Dianthe's form appears to Reuel or Mira appears to them both. These visitations are sometimes clarifying, as when Mira gives Reuel access to a secret letter that reveals Aubrey's wicked designs, but they are just as often twisted and obscuring: Reuel interprets his visitations from Dianthe as fated romance, not estranged kinship, and Dianthe's attempt to kill Aubrey with a poison suggested to her by a disembodied voice leads to her own death. Under better circumstances, their magnetic family tie might work to pull lost loved ones together, and perhaps push all toward their ancestral home. The complicating forces of race and familial and social history—or, what Gillman calls the "irreducible historical identity of race itself as

melodrama in the United States"—thwart and muddy the operation of any positive or progressive magic: they are led instead to coercion, incest, and murder.[39]

The quagmire of life in the post-Reconstruction U.S., where Aubrey is stuck repeating the violence of his white slaveholding father, Reuel feels compelled to disavow his race in order to succeed, and Dianthe is perpetually subject to the will of others, is a counterpoint to the great clarity brought by Reuel's arrival in Telassar, where generations of social life have been structured around the idea of his prophesied return—or, to reverse the formulation, where survival does not depend upon his self-abnegation. Here, even lions recognize and respond to the "remarkable" force of his "personal magnetism" (566). As mentioned earlier, esoteric knowledge is operative in Telassarian temples, architecture, and art, and the perfection of their mystical tools—the "disc" and the "font"—enables controlled and intentional clairvoyant navigation. Hopkins clearly takes part in what Nurhussein calls the "expansive and vague mythology" of Ethiopia popular in the late nineteenth century, even as she writes the first piece of African-American fiction, according to John Cullen Gruesser, actually to place an African-American character in Africa.[40] Indeed, Telassar's prime minister, Ai, loosely quotes the line from Psalms 68:31 at the heart of the mythology: "Ethiopia … is stretching forth her hand unto God, and He will fulfill her destiny" (573). But, I think quite uniquely, Hopkins incorporates the language of magnetism into her Ethiopianist vision. In attributing Reuel's "occult powers" and aptitude to his "Ethiopian extraction," Hopkins both newly historicizes black magic and advances it to the forefront of esoteric knowledge, rendering it more ancient

[39] *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*, p. 4.
[40] Nurhussein, *Black Land*, p. 51. Gruesser, "Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood*: Creating an Afrocentric Fantasy for a Black Middle Class Audience," p. 77.

and more advanced than the Euro-American occult sciences of the U.S. white elite (557-8). "What would the professors of Harvard have said to this?" Reuel asks himself. "In the heart of Africa was a knowledge of science that all the wealth and learning of modern times could not emulate" (576). Held next to the accomplishments of Telassar, Livingston, Sr.'s "two or three" published books on "mesmeric phenomena" would surely appear quite rudimentary—to reverse Benjamin Moseley's claim that obeah represented "rough magnetism," Livingston, Sr.'s mesmerism seems a "rough" version of the ancient Telassarian art (486).

Having survived Aubrey's machinations, the "poverty" and "ostracism" of life in America, and his own contemplations of suicide, Reuel with his great "knowledge of Infinity" turns out to be not only a twentieth-century version of the "man who couldn't be killed," but also the man capable of putting a halt to the persistent violences of slavery—at least in the case of Aubrey, Jr. (443, 574). In the final pages of the novel, Reuel, Hannah, and Ai confront Aubrey in his study. Having learned of Dianthe's murder from Reuel, Ai approaches Aubrey and begins to mesmerize him, prompting Aubrey to wonder, "Why did not these … men he had injured take human vengeance in meting out punishment to him? And why, oh! why did those eyes, piercing his own like poinards, hold him so subtly in their spell?" (619). Departing the study, Ai explains: "Justice will be done." Not "human vengeance," as Aubrey would prefer, and not the justice of the courts, which, thanks to Aubrey's expensive lawyers, exonerate him. Nor does the book wait on the "Lord's strange work" of vengeance, as the character Milly calls for in *Dred*.[41] Rather, shortly after the company's departure, in accordance

[41] *Dred*, p. 576.

with "the ancient laws of the inhabitants of Telassar," Aubrey becomes his "own executioner" (618, 620).

Just as the oppressive racial logics of slavery did not end with the close of the Civil War, occult resistance to and by those logics continued, too. Perhaps not in the overt challenge to white power presented by Gullah Jack, but in the feeling that, to quote Vincent Brown's account of Tacky's Revolt in 1760 Jamaica, "Power is never total. … Another world is not only possible, another world is inevitable."[42] The tight controls over how alternative, reality-altering powers and knowledges could or could not be acknowledged were long in the making, from the usurping of Gullah Jack's invincibility by the Charleston slavocracy to its conscription for a Christian millenialist vision by Stowe. At the turn of the century, Bouvé perfected the project begun by Stowe, rendering Nathaniel's occult body a caricatured "instrument of doom in a mighty hand," his "supreme self-abnegation" engendering white literary fame and a unifying vision of the white North and the white South (*Dred* 558, Bouvé 201). Under such bleak conditions, Hopkins, taking a broad view of decades of white occultism that both appropriated and denigrated black occult power, envisions an alternative to Bouvé's future in which the freed slaves of the Winston plantation disappear from view, crowded out by Penelope and her fair-skinned children. Countering this claiming of black magic for white imperial ends, from Hopkins' *Of One Blood* emerges Telassar, a city which has held black occult power vividly in memory and at the ready. Her vision attempts to clear a space to recuperate African American occult power for more self-determining ends.

[42] *Tacky's Revolt*, 15.

Coda

In 1858, the black occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph expressed a complaint at the way white spiritualists talked of his mediumistic and rhetorical talents. "If … I said anything remarkable or good, above the average intelligence of men of my lineage, why, even then spiritualists refused me the credit, as a general thing, openly taunted me with my natural, ethnological condition, and insulted my soul by denying me common intelligence, but said, by way of salve to the bitter wound, 'You are so extraordinarily developed that the dear angels of the spheral heavens can use you when wide awake!'" In the words of his biographer John Patrick Deveney, "he believed with some justification that his faults were attributed to his race while his accomplishments were laid to the door of the spirits."[43]

We don't know whether Hopkins read Randolph's writing—Lana Finley, outlining the similarities between Randolph and Reuel, finds it likely.[44] If so, Hopkins would have found it disturbing that this black occultist, in his commitment to the science of occultism in the years after the War, himself drifted toward increasingly anti-black sentiments. "The White Magic, which I here reveal," he writes in 1874, one year before his death by suicide (a death Reuel entertains in the opening pages of the novel), "teaches how to rapport the good. The Black Magic of Africa and America (Voudooism) *rapports* us with the denizens of hell; and crime and wretchedness as surely flow out from the one affiliation, as the good flows forth from the

[43] Qtd. in John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*, p. 6.
[44] "Paschal Beverly Randolph in the African American Community."

other."[45] I'd like to believe that with *Of One Blood* Hopkins sought to provide an alternative view to someone like Randolph, a man who built his life around the knowledge that other, more hidden powers flowed in the world than the ones that rendered his "unpopular complexion" such a "great disadvantage"[46]: a confirmation that his powers were his own, that they could be both African and pour forth goodness. Reuel, having arrived in Telassar, reflects back on the fear that led him to "[hide] his origin." "What though the obstacles were many, some way would have been shown him to surmount the difficulties of caste prejudice" (560). As a final gesture, I'd like to suggest that Hopkins in *Of One Blood* sought to provide that "way" for someone like Randolph—perhaps even Randolph himself, beyond the grave.

[45] *Eulis!*, p. 43.
[46] *The Unveiling*, p. 8.

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Vita

Noelle Dubay was born in Fort Kent, Maine. She received a BA in English and a BFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maine at Farmington in 2013. She joined the English PhD program at Johns Hopkins University in 2013. Noelle is the first in her family to receive a PhD.